

# Quebec Left Debates Independence Strategy

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[Québec solidaire](#), the left-wing party founded almost four years ago, held its fifth convention in this Montréal suburb on November 20-22. About 300 elected delegates debated and adopted resolutions on the Quebec national question, electoral reform, immigration policy and secularism. The convention clarified the party's position on some important questions at the heart of its strategic orientation that had been left unresolved at its founding.

Québec solidaire is the product of a fusion process lasting several years among various organizations and left-wing groups that had developed in the context of major actions by the women's, student, global justice and antiwar movements in the 1990s and the early years of this decade. But the party has faced many obstacles as it struggled to establish a visible presence in Quebec's political landscape.<sup>[1]</sup>

As in other parts of North America, Quebec experienced a general downturn in extraparliamentary mobilizations after 9-11, with the notable exception of the massive antiwar actions prior to the Iraq war. Added to this was the political demoralization of many militants following almost a decade of neoliberal austerity under a Parti Québécois government that for many discredited the very idea of Quebec "sovereignty" as envisaged by the PQ. Shortly after Québec solidaire was launched, the trade union movement suffered major defeats in the face of an antilabour offensive by the newly elected Liberal government. The student movement has been relatively quiescent since a successful mobilization against tuition fee increases in 2005. Although antiwar sentiment remains high, mass actions are fewer and smaller.

Aware that "politics" is conventionally viewed as electoral and parliamentary activity, Québec solidaire quickly established itself as an officially recognized party under Quebec law. It soon found its attention, energy and finances absorbed by electoral activity to the detriment of actions outside the electoral arena - contesting two general elections and several by-elections within its first three years, on a limited platform of demands.

Exactly a year ago, however, it scored a significant breakthrough when, despite an undemocratic first-past-the-post electoral system, it managed to elect a member to the National Assembly, Quebec's legislature. The election of Amir Khadir in the Montréal constituency of Mercier brought welcome media attention to the party, while increasing the pressure on it to develop a more comprehensive program on the key issues of the day.

Early this year, the party launched what promises to be a lengthy process aimed at producing a formal program. This convention concluded the first stage of the process.

Under the complex procedure established by the national leadership, members were urged to form "citizens' circles" or affinity groups, which would include non-members. The idea

was to use the debate as a means of reaching out to social movement activists. In later stages, a policy commission was to assemble and “synthesize” the proposals from these groups in a series of resolutions that would either reflect a consensus view or offer alternative positions on the various topics, to be debated in the local and regional associations and later at the convention.

About 70 citizens’ circles were formed. But since many were organized around specific views or areas of interest, there was little exchange with others in the initial period. It was only quite late in the process, with the publication of the draft resolutions in September, that the major preconvention debates could begin. The proposals and amendments were then put together in a synthesis booklet for debate at the convention.

## **National Question**

The major objective at this convention was to define a clear position on the Quebec national question. Although there is today little mention in Québec solidaire – or, indeed, in Quebec society as a whole – of “national oppression,” the issues that motivate the thrust for national sovereignty or independence testify to the existence of a distinct Francophone nation whose language and culture are under constant attack from the Canadian constitutional and political regimes. For decades now, the people of Quebec have stopped referring to themselves as “French Canadians”; they self-define as “Québécois” and they overwhelmingly reject the existing federal system even though they are divided on whether to reform it or repudiate it altogether by establishing an independent country. That is what is meant by the “national question”: the need to resolve this problem, the major fault line in the Canadian state and the major source of instability in the politics of Canada.

The first task in the Québec solidaire debate, then, was to define what is meant by the Quebec nation. This issue has been much debated since the federal Parliament voted in 2006 that “the Québécois form a nation within a united Canada.”<sup>[2]</sup> The Harper government motion was widely recognized as a politically opportunist ruse. Québec solidaire approached the issue in a much more serious way.

First, the delegates discussed what the Quebec nation does not include. They acknowledged the sovereignty of “the ten Amerindian peoples and the Inuit people who also inhabit Quebec territory,” and pledged Québec solidaire’s support to their “fundamental right” to national self-determination, however they choose to exercise that right – whether through self-government within a Quebec state or through their own independence.

Ghislain Picard, Chief of the Assembly of First Nations of Quebec and Labrador, was a keynote speaker at the convention on its opening night. He has praised Québec solidaire as the only party in Quebec that addresses native concerns.

Delegates then adopted an inclusive definition of the “Quebec people” that specifically rejects the concept of an ethnic nation favoured by the Parti Québécois and other nationalists. “Quebec nationality,” it says, “is essentially defined by living in the nation and participating in its life.” The Quebec nation is “ethnically and culturally diversified, with French as the common language of use and factor of integration..., the Francophone community [being] transformed throughout its history by the successive integration of elements originating from the other communities who have been added to it.” This nation “is based not on ethnic origin but on voluntary membership in the Québécois political community.”

The Anglophone community was defined as “an important minority that is an integral part of the Quebec nation and shares its political fate.”

### **For Sovereignty... and Independence**

The major debate was on how Québec solidaire should define its position on Quebec’s constitutional status. Four options were proposed for decision: “independence”; “sovereignty”; “independence or sovereignty”; or “neither independence nor sovereignty for the time being.”

Why this debate? Up to now, Québec solidaire has identified Quebec sovereignty as one of its defining objectives. However, “sovereignty,” the term popularized by the Parti Québécois, is an ambiguous concept, especially when coupled with a proposal for “association” or “partnership” with the rest of Canada, as the PQ proposed in the 1980 and 1995 referendum questions. As a draft convention resolution noted, this tends to trivialize the national question by limiting the implications of a break with the Canadian constitutional setup, presenting Quebec sovereignty as a mere continuation of past fights for provincial autonomy or an extension of Quebec’s existing powers within a new, decentralized federation. Moreover, linking sovereignty with association or partnership in a referendum requires a definitive answer from Québécois on something they do not ultimately control: namely, the character of any future relations with Canada, which can only be the subject of later negotiations. This undermines the very concept of “self-determination.”

The federal government took advantage of this ambiguity when, in 2000, it got Parliament to enact the Clarity Act, which allows Parliament to refuse to recognize the result of a referendum decision on Quebec’s constitutional status. Québec solidaire opposes the Clarity Act as a violation of Quebec’s right to self-determination. But the delegates recognized the political problem: the confusion among many Québécois as a result of the PQ’s ambiguities, and the need for an approach that clearly articulates the unilateral right of the Québécois to determine their own future.

Most of the delegates who spoke in the QS debate declared their personal support of Quebec independence. An adopted resolution states: “Canadian federalism is basically unreformable. It is impossible for Quebec to obtain all the powers it wants and needs for the profound changes proposed by Québec solidaire.” A new relationship with the rest of Canada can only be negotiated once the Québécois have clearly established their intent and ability to form an independent state.

However, many were reluctant to confine the description of the QS position to the word “independence.” Some noted that “sovereignty,” the one objective that unites all PQ members notwithstanding (or perhaps because of) their differences on other questions, is the all-important Article 1 in the PQ program. Was there not a danger, they asked, that if “independence” was chosen as the QS goal, to the exclusion of “sovereignty,” this would become, in effect, Québec solidaire’s “article 1,” its defining difference with the PQ – and thus obscure what all agree is the new party’s underlying conviction: that any new constitutional status for Quebec must be accompanied by a fundamental change in its social conditions, and that for Québec solidaire the national question is indissolubly linked with its “projet de société,” its social agenda.

### **Beyond the Provincial Framework?**

Because the party has not yet adopted a developed program on economic and social issues, or international affairs, there was an air of abstraction to much of the debate, as there had been throughout the pre-congress discussion (and indeed, since the party's founding). During its two provincial election campaigns, QS deliberately limited its "platform" to proposals that were (as it admitted) confined to the "provincial and neoliberal" framework. This approach tended to inhibit thinking in the party about what an anticapitalist program for an independent Quebec might entail.

A case in point was the [May Day Manifesto published this year by the QS top leadership](#). Although its overview of the economic crisis was couched in anticapitalist rhetoric, the manifesto's specific proposals to overcome the crisis failed to go beyond a timid social liberalism.<sup>[3]</sup>

An anticapitalist and ecosocialist strategy and program would necessarily challenge the existing federal regime. Nationalize the banks? Banking is a federal jurisdiction. Break from the capitalist trade and investment agreements like NAFTA? Trade and commerce are federal jurisdictions. Introduce a comprehensive unemployment insurance program guaranteeing a living income and retraining to those who lose their jobs and livelihoods through capitalist "rationalization"? Unemployment insurance is a federal jurisdiction. Nation-to-nation relations with the indigenous peoples? "Indian affairs" are an exclusive federal jurisdiction. A rehabilitation-based approach to criminal justice? Defense of the right to abortion? Criminal law is a federal jurisdiction. Break from the imperialist military alliances, NATO and NORAD? Support the Bolivarian revolution in Venezuela? Foreign affairs and the military are federal jurisdictions. And so on.

Delegates [adopted a resolution](#) that outlines in very general terms how Québec solidaire envisages an independent Quebec.

The case for an independent Quebec is immeasurably strengthened when placed in the context of a program for fundamental social change, for building "another Quebec," a new country that is free of both national oppression and class exploitation. But "class" is a concept that gets little recognition in Québec solidaire's perspectives. As a party with a leadership that has developed largely in the feminist, community and NGO milieu, it is highly conscious of the need to create an inclusive coalition of interests that can fight to overcome the inequalities of Quebec's diverse society, but seems little cognizant of the most inclusive concept of all: that of the working class, which embraces - in their diversity of colour, gender, national and ethnic origin, sexual orientation, etc. - all who must sell their labour power in order to live. The Québécois are oppressed not only by Canada's federal regime but by Capital; national liberation is incomplete without anticapitalist social liberation, the establishment of a government by and for working people.

Quebec solidaire's piecemeal approach to program development, by leaving key questions of social and economic policy, including the ecological crisis, to later debate, tends to separate the national from the social. Yet it was precisely the Parti Québécois' failure to address the need for major social change prior to the achievement of sovereignty that prompted many movement activists to found Québec solidaire.

In the end, after several hours of debate, the convention rejected proposals by small numbers of delegates that QS favour neither sovereignty nor independence, or define its orientation as sovereigntist alone. But it also rejected a proposal, advanced by a substantial number, that QS define its orientation on the national question exclusively as

“independentist,” and voted by close to a two-thirds majority that it use both terms to describe its position, depending on context.

A paragraph in the adopted resolution on Canadian federalism indicates how the terms might be used interchangeably: “The Quebec people therefore must choose between subjection to Canadian majority rule, which implies political subordination and uniformity, and the full and unrestricted exercise of political sovereignty. The national question is thereby reduced to its simplest expression: to be a minority nation in the Canadian state, or a nation that decides all of its orientations in an independent Quebec.”

The convention also clarified an additional concept, that of “popular sovereignty.” Although this expression has in the past been used by some QS leaders as a synonym for their constitutional option, and sometimes as a shorthand means of dissociating it from the “ethnic sovereignty” of hard-line nationalists, the convention decision clarifies that popular sovereignty is addressed to procedure, not the goal: it signifies “the power of the people to decide democratically their future and the rules governing their own lives, including the fundamental rules such as whether or not to belong to a country....”

### **A Constituent Assembly**

How to achieve independence? Since its founding, QS has urged that Quebec’s status be decided in a democratic process involving the entire population, and not simply limited – as in the Parti Québécois procedure – to a yes or no vote in a referendum on a question determined through negotiations among the parties represented in the National Assembly. In a resolution that was adopted unanimously, the delegates sketched the major features of this process as they might be enacted by a Québec solidaire government.

The government would propose that the National Assembly “affirm the sovereignty of the people of Quebec and that they alone are entitled to decide their institutions and political status, without interference from outside.” A distinct Constituent Assembly would be elected by universal suffrage, composed equally of women and men. The ballot would ensure “proportional representation of tendencies and the various socio-economic milieus within Quebec society,” with equitable access for all to the means of communication. The Constituent Assembly would then conduct an extensive process of participatory democracy in which the people of Quebec would be consulted on their views concerning Quebec’s “political and constitutional future and the values and political institutions pertaining to it.” The Assembly’s conclusions – in effect, a draft Constitution – would then be put to a popular vote in a referendum. Throughout this process, “Québec solidaire will defend the necessity for the political independence of Quebec.... But it will not presume the outcome of the debates.”

Thus, whatever the outcome of the Constituent Assembly proceedings and the referendum vote on ratification, the procedure itself, as proposed by QS, constitutes an act of national self-determination. Several delegates noted in the debate the parallels with the recent processes in Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador, where an overhaul of constitutions has helped to shift the relationship of class forces more in favour of the subaltern classes.

The delegates also voted that in launching the Constituent Assembly, the indigenous nations should be invited to join the process on whatever terms the indigenous themselves decide and that, irrespective of their participation, the Constituent Assembly should recognize the



distinct sovereignty of the indigenous nations.

Is the Constituent Assembly simply to be treated as an item on the agenda of a Québec solidaire government? Until now, the party's advocacy of a Constituent Assembly has not been accompanied by a clear position of its own on Quebec's constitutional status: "The people will decide, through a process of participatory democracy." This ambiguity reflected opposition to the independence option or unease about it among some of Québec solidaire's founding members, especially those coming from the grassroots community-based activist milieu that tends not to see politics in strategic terms as a struggle for state power.

By a very close vote, the delegates decided that Québec solidaire should launch "a vast campaign of popular education" to build "a democratic, social and national alliance that will bring together all of the trade unions, popular movements, feminists, students, ecologists and sovereigntist parties" in support of "popular sovereignty concretized by the election of a Constituent Assembly." So far, the only concrete indication of how this campaign might be conducted is the decision that building this coalition of forces "will be the focus of our intervention within the Conseil de la souveraineté." The Conseil is an umbrella coalition of pro-sovereignty organizations dominated organizationally and politically by the Parti Québécois, which uses it to promote support for its own referendum strategy and option on the national question. QS is a member of the Conseil.

Further initiatives and actions will be needed to build the mass support needed to achieve not only a democratic Constituent Assembly but independence. In Latin America, popular agitation for constituent assemblies did not await the advent of progressive governments, but in some cases (e.g. Bolivia and Ecuador) helped to prepare their election through mass mobilizations focusing on the need for fundamental changes in the social structures of those countries. These experiences might offer some useful pointers for Québec solidaire as it develops its campaign.

## **Democratization**

The convention also adopted proposals that would democratize Quebec institutions and the electoral process. The delegates unanimously voted in favour of establishment of democratically elected regional governments with independent powers and funding to replace the present system of regional municipalities and conferences, purely administrative entities that are nothing but creatures of the provincial government. Québec solidaire also favours a combination of incentive and mandatory provisions to establish equal representation of women in all elected bodies, including municipal councils and boards of directors.

Delegates adopted a series of proposals for proportional representation that Québec solidaire MNA Amir Khadir plans to present in a bill in the National Assembly within the coming months. Under the proposed procedure, 60% of MNAs would be elected under the present first-past-the-post system as constituency representatives, and the other 40% according to the proportion of the vote held by the various parties that received 2% or more of the vote nationally.

This is, understandably, an important issue for Québec solidaire, which barely managed to elect Khadir, in 2008, and has slim prospects of electing other MNAs under the existing system. However, although the need for proportional representation has been debated and widely supported by many in recent years, there is no evidence that the major capitalist

parties, the governing Liberals and Opposition PQ, are sympathetic. Each has managed to establish “majority” governments on the basis of mere voting pluralities, sometimes even less. And they intend to keep it that way.

### **Freedom of Belief Within a Secular State**

Québec solidaire has always been a partisan of a secular Quebec, one in which church and state are clearly separated. The abolition of church control of schools and hospitals was a major achievement of the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s, overcoming the grip of the Catholic hierarchy and spurring the growth of the feminist movement. This combination of national secularization and feminism was reflected in the acquittal on abortion charges of Dr. Henry Morgenthaler by four successive Quebec juries in the 1970s, leading eventually to decriminalization of abortion throughout Canada.

The convention adopted what it termed a “model of secularism” as part of the party’s program. It distinguishes between the need for state neutrality toward religious belief or lack of belief, and the freedom of individuals “to express their own convictions in a context that favours exchange and dialogue.” And the delegates attempted to define their position on an issue that has been hotly debated in Quebec in recent years: whether a secular state should impose restrictions on expressions of personal religious belief by its employees and public officials. In recent years, right-wing politicians and narrow nationalists have campaigned against Muslims and other ethnic minorities who wear “ostentatious symbols” of their faith such as the Moslem hijab, or scarf.[\[4\]](#)

Delegates voted in favour of allowing “state agents” (employees and officials) to wear religious insignia (a crucifix, hijab, whatever), but added some caveats that leave much to subjective interpretation and enforcement by employers: “provided they are not used as instruments of proselytism” and do not interfere with their *droit de réserve* (duty of discretion), or “impede the performance of the duties or contravene safety standards.” Delegates rejected other resolutions that would impose no such restrictions or, alternatively, would impose secular dress codes on civil servants, and they rejected as well a proposal to refer the whole issue for further decision at a later convention.

In a 2007 brief to the Bouchard-Taylor commission on “reasonable accommodation”, Québec solidaire argued that “We do not think the State should legislate on the wearing of religious symbols by persons working in the public service,” while urging public employees to “subordinate their personal, religious and political beliefs to the ethics of their duties.” A similar position was recommended by the commission in its report, hailed by Québec solidaire leaders Françoise David and Amir Khadir for its “modernity and wisdom.”[\[5\]](#)

At the convention, David and many other delegates, particularly women, spoke strongly in support of “intercultural secularism” and “reasonable accommodation” of the beliefs and customs of immigrant and ethnic minorities. A young woman delegate graphically illustrated the distinction between state policy and individual belief: “I object to a state agent who refuses a gay marriage licence because he or she is homophobic. But I have no problem with one who grants the licence while wearing clothing that signifies his or her religious belief.” Others noted that similar issues of individual choice were involved in the fight to legalize the right to abortion. The debate confirmed that feminist consciousness is alive and well within Québec solidaire. This positive feature of the party is reflected in all its activities. For example, in the two general elections since its founding, a majority of its candidates have been women – a first in Quebec and probably in Canada.

The convention debate echoed similar debates in the Quebec feminist and gay movements in recent years. Bolstering the QS leadership's stance was the progressive, integrationist approach taken last May by the leading feminist coalition, the Quebec Women's Federation (FFQ), after a lengthy discussion among its many affiliates.[\[6\]](#)

But it was clear that some Québec solidaire members are not immune to the nationalist and Islamophobic backlash against immigrants, especially Muslims. Some are influenced by the monolithic concept of citizenship that is characteristic of republican France, which has banned the hijab even from the public schools.

In the convention's closing moments, however, the delegates voted in favour of an immigration policy that would welcome immigrants to Quebec and especially refugees – not only those categories already recognized by UN convention but also “women who are victims of violence, persons whose survival is threatened by natural catastrophes and climate change, and persons persecuted by reason of their sexual orientation or identity.” And they called for a Quebec that is “diversified, pluralist and inclusive,” in which French, as “the language of public life,” is “not only the expression of a culture but also the instrument of a democratic agenda.” In particular, they called for stronger measures to help immigrants acquire the necessary facility in French in order to function fully as citizens.

These concepts were eloquently described by Louise Laurin in a keynote speech on the convention's opening night. Laurin, a well-known and longstanding advocate of Quebec independence, was the founder and leader of the coalition that finally achieved secularization of the Quebec public school system in the 1990s. As an educator, she has specialized in developing programs for the integration of immigrant children in the schools.

“The use of a common language, French,” said Laurin,

“acts as a unifying element. Secularism of the state and its institutions is a signal of acceptance of pluralism.... Once we have founded a country, we form the majority. We no longer need to situate ourselves as a protesting minority, sometimes competing with others. It falls to us to be an exemplary majority that respects minorities, as we are already doing. When Quebec becomes sovereign, new arrivals will become Québec citizens. The feeling of membership in Quebec will be able to develop further: citizenship establishes equality among citizens.”

### **Some Omissions**

With few exceptions, the convention reaffirmed positions that have been expressed by Québec solidaire leadership bodies in the past. These now have the stamp of authority as “program.” However, it is worth noting that the adopted resolutions do not cover even the full range of issues being debated publicly today on these topics selected by the QS leadership for adoption at this convention.

For example, there was little reference to language policy, although French is the key defining characteristic of the Québécois nation and its defence is the principal driving force behind independentist sentiment. The recent Supreme Court judgment striking down yet another provision of Quebec's popular Charter of the French Language underscored the fragility of the progress to date in making French the “common language of public discourse,” as several delegates noted in the debates.[\[7\]](#) But the primacy of the French language is also threatened by capitalist globalization and demographic trends – particularly



in Montréal, the metropolis, where statistical projections indicate that it may become a minority language within a few years. There is an urgent need for aggressive measures to encourage the acquisition of French-language skills among immigrants and to assist their integration into the work force, as well as to increase the mandatory use of French in the workplace.

Unemployment rates are several times higher for immigrants than for the general population. Does Québec solidaire favour affirmative action for newcomers in Quebec government jobs, where French is the language of work?

The Charter mandates francization committees in all businesses and industries with 50 or more employees. There is growing support in Quebec for extending this requirement to companies with fewer than 50 employees. Likewise, many Québécois want to prohibit attendance at English-language junior colleges (CEGEPs) by Francophones and others whose first language is not English. Others, aware that many Francophones and allophones attend the English CEGEP to gain fluency in that language, instead propose measures to qualitatively improve the teaching of English, but within the French-language setting of the public school system.

In its 2008 election platform, Québec solidaire called for establishment of French-language monitoring committees in firms with 25 or more employees and strengthening of French-language education. But clearly its demands could be fleshed out further.

Since its founding, Québec solidaire has displayed a preference for general policy statements on which a broad consensus already exists, both within Quebec society and within the party. A notable exception was the leadership's opposition to banning ostentatious symbols of individual religious belief – a position that has brought the party and Françoise David in particular under vicious attacks from “left” nationalists, although in this instance, as indicated earlier, it is consistent with the views of many feminist organizations.

This culture of consensus was understandable in the period immediately following the founding of Québec solidaire, given the quite different organizational legacies of its two major components. One of these, the Union des forces progressistes included young people from the global justice movement – internationalist, anti-capitalist, and strong supporters of Quebec independence – along with an older layer of members, many with long experience in left and far-left politics. The members of Option citoyenne, on the other hand, tended to be involved in feminist coalitions and community groups organizing around tenants' rights, food and housing co-ops and the like, where the politics of consensus and accommodation of conflicting views and interests are valued. The newly fused party needed time in which the members could gain experience working together in a common organizational framework.

However, over time the downside of this approach became evident. Increasingly, the party executive was setting policy to the exclusion of discussion among the broader membership. This trend was facilitated by the party's lack of publications other than a web site in which most of the political content was devoted to reproducing leadership statements. Meanwhile, with the election of an MNA, the party was confronted with new challenges of developing policy on a host of issues confronting it in the National Assembly.

## **A Beneficial Discussion**

The preconvention program debate, limited as it was, may have marked the end of this period. For the first time, Québec solidaire leaders differed publicly. François Saillant and Stéphane Lessard, members of the party executive, took issue with the draft program proposals published by the QS policy commission preparatory to the convention. “What is proposed to us,” they wrote, “is nothing less than the program of an independent Quebec and an eventual Republic of Quebec. Whatever the commission’s intention, independence would thereby become Article 1 of the program, from which everything else would follow.” They proposed “another logic that does not make our proposals as a whole conditional on the accession to sovereignty, even if we are equally convinced of its necessity.”

Saillant and Lessard argued that “a large part of what we propose is feasible here and now.” A Québec solidaire government, they said, would have to govern for years before a Constituent Assembly had opted for an independent Quebec. Meanwhile, the party would have to govern within the provincial framework, doing what it could to implement its social agenda.

The adopted position – both independence and sovereignty – is not inconsistent with this view.

A contribution signed by, among others, Arthur Sandborn, past chair of the Montréal council of the Confederation of National Trade Unions (CSN), questioned whether sovereignty was even necessary as an objective. Québec solidaire, it argued, “should maintain an open and inclusive stance on sovereignty.”

Quebec, it said, must have all the powers needed for its full development socially, economically, culturally and politically. Such development, it conceded, “is not entirely possible in the present federal framework.” But sovereignty should be considered a means, not an end, and there was a danger that an unequivocally independentist party would alienate progressives who are not comfortable with the prospect of a sovereign Quebec. Moreover, they argued, the federal regime was not the main threat to Quebec’s culture and language: “the struggle for cultural or economic sovereignty, in many respects, lies more in a struggle against the United States than against Canada.”

After this perspective got only 9 votes out of 250, Sandborn announced he was resigning from QS and stormed out of the convention. Generally, however, the discussions were notable for their high political level and respectful engagement with dissenting views. And the open discussion of differing perspectives contributed to the clarity of the debates and the comprehension of the issues.

## **Electoralism**

If Québec solidaire was deeply involved in extraparliamentary struggles “in the streets” and not primarily a party “of the ballot boxes” – as the mantra goes – the membership might be better equipped to confront these issues, develop responses, and build the party, in light of their experiences, as a real anticapitalist, ecosocialist and independentist alternative. But QS has evolved since its founding as an essentially electoralist formation, focused on electing its candidates to the National Assembly. As a result, it participates very little as a party in Quebec’s grassroots social and international solidarity movements or in the trade unions (although some unions have endorsed QS election candidates). Instead, the party tends to see itself as an electoral or parliamentary expression of these movements. The party has issued statements of support to some labour, environmental and feminist

struggles. A few of its associations and committees have authored briefs on specific issues for presentation to legislative committees. But the only centrally led campaigns are around elections.

A very positive development at the convention was the vote to support the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement against apartheid Israel. (See [Québec solidaire supports pro-Palestine BDS campaign](#).) However, there was no discussion of how the party might implement this campaign, the only such extra-parliamentary action that made it onto the agenda.

The result of this electoralism, it seems, is a certain demobilization of the membership and a stagnation in recruitment. The party's national coordination committee reported that Québec solidaire has 5,000 paid-up members (that is, who have made a minimum commitment of \$5 annually), although there is a list of another 5,000 who are considered financial donors or sympathizers. Shortly after its founding, QS boasted close to 6,000 members. As an official party under Quebec's election laws, Québec solidaire derives most of its funding, directly or indirectly, from the state although its share of the popular vote has yet to exceed 4% nationally.<sup>[8]</sup>

Of the 72 recognized constituency associations, one-third were reported to be "very active," another third "less active" and the rest minimally active. The party has five full-time employees in addition to staff in Amir Khadir's parliamentary office. It has a functioning national office and a web site that features leadership pronouncements and media releases, but no regular public media such as a newspaper or magazine. A summer training camp was attended by about 100 members.

One weakness that was very evident at the convention is that Québec solidaire is overwhelmingly white. Neither its membership nor its leading bodies reflect the diverse ethnic and immigrant composition of Quebec, although its one MNA, Amir Khadir, is an Iranian-Québécois representing one of the most ethnically diverse constituencies in Quebec. The party has adopted an open integrative approach to minorities. But clearly much more needs to be done. Active intervention in the unions and social movements around the perspective of an independent ecosocialist Quebec, if made the axis of Québec solidaire's activity in the coming period, could help to build its influence among people of colour. Khadir's success indicates the potential for advances along these lines.

These are some of the challenges facing Québec solidaire. This convention registered important progress, clarified a few key issues, and indicated some of the problems to be tackled by the party in the period ahead. •

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## Notes

1. For more background information see "[Quebec: Toward a new left party in 2005?](#)" Relay #4.

2. See [A 'Québécois Nation'? Harper Fuels an Important Debate](#), Bullet #40, December 18, 2006.

3. In addition to calling for increased spending on public transit infrastructure, social housing, energy efficiency, childcare facilities, etc., the manifesto proposed fighting “excess profits” through encouraging worker co-ops and purchase of locally produced goods; curtailing government subsidies to businesses; countering increases in the cost of living by exempting more products from sales tax and raising the minimum wage to \$10.20 an hour; protecting pensions by reducing contribution limits on individual retirement savings plans (RRSPs) and increasing Quebec Pension Plan contribution limits, and getting the Quebec Caisse, which manages the QPP (and had just announced a loss of \$40-billion on the financial markets), to invest in “ecologically and socially responsible businesses.” None of these modest proposals conflicts with the federal regime. For a detailed critique (in French) of the manifesto from an anticapitalist perspective, see Marc Bonhomme [Discours anticapitaliste, plan anti-crise social-libéral](#).

4. See [What the Québec Debate on the Hijab Conceals](#). For background:

[The Kirpan Ruling: A Victory for Public School Integration](#)

[Quebec’s Debate on ‘Reasonable Accommodation’ – A Socialist View](#).

5. See the [QS brief to the Commission](#), and the David-Khadir [response to the Commission report](#), as well as page 271 of the [English version of the Commission’s report](#).

6. See [La FFQ Prend Position – ni obligation religieuse, ni interdiction étatique](#).

7. Québec solidaire leaders slammed the Supreme Court ruling. See [Québécois Denounce Supreme Court Attack on Language Rights](#).

8. Under Quebec election law, the government reimburses 50% of legal election expenses to every party obtaining at least 1% of the popular vote. In 2008, Québec solidaire, which ran 122 candidates in the general election, qualified for \$300,000 in government funding from this source. In addition, the government pays an additional amount to each party for day-to-day administration under a formula based on the number of registered voters. Québec solidaire received a further \$100,000 from this source. Of the party’s total annual revenues of \$1,045,000, therefore, about 40% was direct funding by the government. Membership fees accounted for only 3% (\$28,367). However, the party also raised about \$540,000, just over half of its total revenues, from individual contributors who are eligible for a tax credit of 75% of the first \$400 contributed; this amounts to an indirect subsidy from the state. Trade unions are prohibited from contributing to political parties. Source: [Directeur général des élections du Québec](#).

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