

Quebec Politics and the Rise of Québec Solidaire (QS)

An interview with André Frappier of Québec solidaire

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Global Research, February 26, 2020

[Socialist Forum](#)

Region: [Canada](#)

Theme: [History](#)

The 2018 [national assembly](#) election in Québec marked a breakthrough for the Left. While a right-wing coalition won the most votes, the election's biggest surprise was the unprecedented success of the left-wing, pro-independence party Québec solidaire (Solidarity Québec, QS). It broke out of its traditional base in Montréal, doubled its share of the popular vote, and tripled its seat count. With 16% of the vote and 10 seats in the Québec parliament, this was the best result for the party since its establishment in 2006. The party's 2018 platform was wide-ranging and radical. It included, among other things, an aggressive program to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and transition to renewable energy; massive investments in public transportation and infrastructure spending; free public education from preschool through university; strengthening and expanding the universal health program, particularly the creation of a universal drug insurance plan; a universal legal aid plan; an expansion of workers' rights and union power; the replacement of first-past-the-post elections with proportional representation; and the eventual establishment of an independent Québec.

At the 2017 party convention, the party voted against co-operation with the *Parti Québécois* (Quebecer Party, PQ), traditionally the leading party of the sovereigntist center-left, and agreed to begin talks with the centre-left sovereigntist *Option nationale* (National Option, ON) party. In the 2018 provincial election, QS gained 7 more seats, bringing them to a total of 10 and tying the PQ in seats. In 2019, QS was officially recognized as the second opposition party in the Québec national assembly, behind the *Parti libéral du Québec* (Québec Liberal Party, PLQ) and ahead of the PQ. The [2019 QS party convention](#) completed the merger process with ON through the adoption of a fusion agreement, which entailed the alignment of the QS and ON party programs.

While it is often overlooked on the U.S. left, Québec has been the scene of some of the biggest and most successful movements against neoliberalism since the 2008 financial crisis, including the [massive student strikes](#) of 2012. Nearly 40% of Québec workers are unionized, and the province has an [extensive social economy](#) composed of a wide array of non-profit organizations and cooperative institutions. And of course, it has an active sovereignty movement that nearly won independence from the rest of Canada in 1995 and has recently experienced a [resurgence](#) in Québec and Canadian politics.

Here, former QS co-spokesperson André Frappier speaks with DSA National Political Committee member Megan Svoboda about the state of Québécois politics, the prospects for QS and the broader Québécois left, and the importance of international solidarity today.

Megan Svoboda: *Can you give a brief description of the overall state of Québécois politics right now?*

André Frappier: There comes a time when the parties that have dominated the political stage no longer meet the demands of the moment or are unable to stem the tide of social forces. This is what happened to the PQ, which lost all credibility, and to the corrupt PLQ.

Like the Liberals, the *Coalition Avenir Québec* (Coalition for Québec's Future, CAQ) is a federalist party beholden to capital and committed to a neoliberal economic agenda, but it demarcates itself by its pandering to ethnic nationalism and xenophobia. Where the Liberals have long been the electoral choice of immigrants, the CAQ deliberately appealed to anti-immigrant sentiment, promising to reduce immigration levels, subject new immigrants to draconian values and language tests, and forbid public service employees from wearing visible religious symbols — a measure understood to target veiled Muslim women in particular. This demagogic catering to fear of “the other” is also part of what sets the CAQ apart from [Doug Ford's right-wing populism](#) in Ontario.

The election of the CAQ represents a break with the historical pattern of the Liberals and the PQ alternating control of the reins of government. And that is not by chance. From the start, the idea was to marginalize the PQ and the sovereigntist option by creating a party based on ethnic nationalism ready to prey on the fear of immigration. And that was the aim of former PQ cabinet minister François Legault, former PQ leader Lucien Bouchard, businessman Charles Sirois, and the [Desmarais clan](#) in founding the CAQ in 2011.

What made the CAQ's task easier was the abandonment of the fight for social justice and sovereignty by successive PQ leaderships over several decades. In fact, the PQ's only objective was to maintain its place as a provincial manager in a globalized world with all the consequences that flow from that ambition: support for free trade, privatization, fees for public services, a tax system that favours the rich, and fossil fuel development. As a new party that had never held power, the CAQ was able to depict itself as a force for change.

MS: What is Québec solidaire, and what are its political and ideological roots?

AF: QS was founded in 2006 in Montréal by the merger of the left-wing party *Union des forces progressistes* (Union of Progressive Forces, UFP) and the alter-globalization political movement *Option citoyenne* (*Citizen Option*), led by **Françoise David**. It was formed around a number of activists and politicians who had written [Manifeste pour un Québec solidaire](#), a left-wing response to [Pour un Québec lucide](#).

In its founding objectives and values, QS declares that it clearly rejects neoliberalism and proposes a political alternative based on democracy, popular sovereignty, the independence of Québec and progressive values such as: social justice and an equitable sharing of wealth, equality between women and men, sustainable development, the elimination of racism, pacifism and solidarity between peoples. It is pluralist, that is to say, it allows plural participation and expression of people, groups, different points of view and sensitivities in a spirit of unity. It is feminist, egalitarian, and aims for equal representation of women and men at all levels.

QS takes into account the diversity of needs, realities and identities, including regional ones. It is inclusive and promotes the presence of young people, cultural communities and people with disabilities. QS is active in the electoral field and in the field of social struggles. It is

inspired by the demands of progressive social and environmental movements, while recognizing the respective independence of the party and these movements.

After an important debate among our ranks, in March 2019 QS adopted a position against the proposed legislation 21 from CAQ government [this law bans public employees from wearing religious symbols, and requires that people's faces be uncovered when giving or receiving public services - ed.] that was to be adopted at the Québec parliament a month later.

Our position was: "Considering that the duty of reserve applies to the actions and decisions of people and not their appearance; No particular rule on religious symbols should apply to certain professions rather than others, including those who exercise coercive power."

MS: What factors do you think lead to its recent growth in membership and representation in the Parliament?

AF: The success of QS in more than doubling its seats from three to 10, including four seats outside Montréal, was a real victory that opens a new chapter for the Left. In a way, QS also benefited from the desire for change, but it had a much tougher hill to climb given the mudslinging against the Left.

At the same time support for the PQ has declined steadily since 2003, because of their neoliberal policies but also because of their dead end strategy concerning Québec's sovereignty. For the older generation PQ was more and more a party of power, and the former PQ leader Jean-François Lisée made his electoral campaign with the promise to only speak of a referendum in a second term. And for the young generation PQ's vision of sovereignty is seen as a neoliberal and anti-environment project. The secular charter proposed by the PQ government in 2014 also had a big impact on the population. Part of it supported CAQ in the 2018 election but another part was worried.

The decision not to make alliances with PQ made at the May 2017 QS convention was a turning point. Contrary to mainstream thinking, QS has started a rise in polls. There was a lot of pressure on QS during that period, led by Jean-François Lisée, for an alliance of sovereigntists against the Liberal Party. His goal was to hang QS on the PQ's flagship. At the end of the road you better vote for the ones who can really beat the Liberals, when it is time to vote that's the choice you have to make, especially if the alternatives seem similar.

After that convention Lisée showed his real face and accused QS of being run by a Soviet-style "politburo." In the final days of the campaign he insinuated that QS co-spokesperson Manon Massé was not the real leader of the party and that QS had a hidden agenda.

The arrival of Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois in early 2017 had also an important impact on the rise of membership.

MS: Why do you think the fight for Québec independence is important to the broader fight for international socialism?

AF: The Québec social movement is unique in Canada because of the national question. The history of national oppression, the fight for French language and the reality of economic differences between the Anglo establishment and the francophone majority working class shaped Québec more as a nation than as a province. Combined with the fact that under the federal legislation, education and health are under provincial responsibility, fights with the

labor movement or the student movement become national fights. That situation does not exist in what we call the Rest of Canada (ROC). For example, there couldn't be a student strike in Canada like the one in Québec in 2012.

That's why independence brings social change that challenges the Canadian imperialist state itself. To achieve that goal, only a broad social movement can lead the struggle for Québec sovereignty, because the people of Québec will not undertake such an important struggle as gaining independence unless the aim is to improve their lives and obtain control of their resources. That movement will lead to a change in the relationship of forces in favor of the working class and a social change that will shake the foundations of the Canadian state.

Of course, the Canadian establishment will fight this tooth and nail. The Gomery commission highlighted the illegal operation and the huge sum of money invested during the 1995 referendum to influence the vote of Quebecers. That gives us an indication of how far they might go in the event of real social change. Neither the PQ nor the [Bloc Québécois](#) (Quebecer Bloc, BQ) will ever support such a mobilization, which would work in opposition to their neoliberal policies. And without a social project real sovereignty is not possible. By changing the relationship of forces, Québec's social struggle can help the labor and social movements in Canada in their own struggle for social emancipation.

From this perspective, the solidarity of the Canadian labor movement with Québec's struggle for sovereignty is not only essential to the fight for social justice in Canada, but crucial because by it will also involve fighting Canadian reaction against the Québec social movement.

This is what we learn from international solidarity. There is no place for struggle isolated from the rest of the world, especially in this period of globalization where multinational corporations impose their control over our planet, making it a polluted waste dump and creating poverty, both of which put the well-being and the very survival of future generations at risk. Our struggle combines with those of other progressive movements. The support of each is crucial to the victory of all.

MS: What advice do you have for people, especially young people, who are socialist organizers in the United States?

AF: Your struggle is very important, even though you don't see the benefit right now. The fact is you are fighting back, you are organizing people and giving hope. Your work shines beyond your borders and makes it possible for us in Québec and for the Left in Canada to develop an internationalist perspective in North America. Such a goal is very important and couldn't be done without the work of socialist organizers in the United States.

A Left organization is always under pressure of all kinds. It is important to give an important place to political debates and political training to strengthen the organization as well as to implement democratic structures and democratic functioning. It is also a good way to counter the influence of the dominant financial and political establishment among the working class.

As far as I can see, this is something you are already doing. So I will just say that we have to develop our internationalist perspective. This is crucial to fight back [against] imperialism in the U.S. and Canada.

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