

A new party in Canada: Québec Solidaire and the resistance

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With 15,000 members, two elected Members of the National Assembly (MNAs) in Québec's provincial parliament, [1] and about 10 percent in the polls, Québec Solidaire (QS) is now a well-established force in a shifting political landscape. A party uniting different currents and sensibilities on the left, it has emerged in the context of a series of mass mobilizations against austerity policies and imperialist wars. It embodies the enormous potential of those movements as well as their limitations and contradictions.

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QS was the only party that wholly identified with the massive student mobilization from February to June 2012, known as the Maple Spring (printemps érable). The only QS MNA at the time, Amir Khadir, not only opposed the “back to school legislation” adopted to force an end to the strike, he endorsed disobedience to that law and participated in illegal demonstrations himself, like most QS members. QS is also the only party in the National Assembly advocating free tuition for universities. Undoubtedly, this explains why the party membership doubled in 2012; this in spite of the fact that all major student unions kept their distance from political parties during the struggle and remained neutral during the election campaign.

More recently, it has been the only party squarely opposed to the various pipeline projects going through Québec to bring tar sands and shale oil to the East Coast, as well as plans to develop offshore oil drilling in the Gulf of Saint Lawrence. It led a campaign last fall around a series of proposals for a green energy and green jobs policy. In the context of the accidental corporate bombing of Lac-Mégantic—the derailment and explosion in eastern Québec last summer of fourteen train cars carrying crude oil that killed more than forty-five people and destroyed more than thirty buildings—this approach is very well received by a significant segment of the population.

The dynamic of Left regroupment

After decades of domination of the global Left political landscape by social-democratic/labor or Communist/Stalinist parties, the 1980s was a period of decline of these traditions and the opening of a space allowing for new political experiences and experiments. Social-Democrats adapted completely to the austerity regime of neoliberalism, transforming themselves into social-liberals. Communists were demoralized and demobilized by the collapse of the bureaucratic dictatorships they had equated with socialism and the neoliberal transformations of Russia and China.

But from that crisis of the old to the birth of the new, the process is long and complex and takes many different forms adapted to the specific history and situation of each country. In Brazil, a vibrant working-class movement against the military dictatorship allowed for the creation of the Workers Party (PT), which later formed the government under President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and adapted, in turn, to neoliberalism. Being the first country with a new type of party (the PT called itself neither social-democratic nor communist), it also saw the first second generation left regroupment with PSOL, in 2004.

In Italy, a split in the very large and influential Communist Party led to Rifundazione Comunista. Through the 1990s, it played a key role in the multiparty Italian Parliament, but entered into a crisis after supporting a social-liberal-led coalition government. In Germany, a left split from the Social-Democrats, converging with a fragment from the East German Communist Party gave us Die Linke (founded in 2007), a party with significant anticapitalist elements, but one that also participated in local and regional governments in coalition with the old Social-Democrats.

This list could go on and on with Respect in England and Wales, the Scottish Socialist Party, the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste (NPA) in France, the Left Bloc in Portugal, and Syriza in Greece. For our argument, the main lesson to draw from these experiences is that they all represent a step forward in attempting to build a new mass political movement on the left, but always with contradictions and difficulties. We need to embrace that potential while being aware of its limitations to make the most out of those opportunities.

Mass movements of resistance to austerity, oppression, and imperialist war need to find a political expression, to converge into an attempt to change power (not simply take it) if they are to be successful and not always on the defensive. At the same time, activists are wary, with good reason, not to repeat top-down political models based on accommodation with capitalism or bureaucratic centralization.

A history of national oppression

A distinctive feature of politics and social struggles in Québec is that the majority of the population of the current Canadian province has experienced a history of oppression based on their language (French) and religion (Catholic), starting with the conquest of New France by England during what US historiography calls the French and Indian War (or Seven Years War—1756-63).

The British occupiers followed the classic colonialist model of coopting local elites and supporting their privileges in exchange for an alliance against the overexploited lower classes. As a result, the Catholic Church maintained its domination over education and health services until the 1960s. Also, the semi-feudal landowning system established in New France (seigneuries) was continued until the 1850s, when the peasantry was allowed to take massive mortgages in order to buy the land they had been working on for several generations. This made it possible for the lords to convert their old

privileges into capital, while poor peasant families continued paying those mortgages for decades.

The French Canadian working class was used as cheap labor (not unlike the Irish) in the second half of the nineteenth century, many migrating to New England to work in textile mills. Until the 1970s, it was very common for French-speaking workers to have English employers and have to function in an English-speaking workplace, in spite of French speakers being the majority, both at the factory and in the town.

This oppression led to several major confrontations between the majority of French Canadians and the Canadian State, especially in times of war. Political crisis erupted during both World Wars over the draft. With the Quiet Revolution—the period of secularization, modernization, and progressive state and educational reform in Québec during the 1960s—a new movement for independence developed, with strong socialist elements. The Canadian state responded with massive police surveillance and waves of repression, most notably during the October crisis of 1970 when 500 activists were imprisoned without charges and 3,000 homes were searched by police without warrants.

To this day, the province of Québec still hasn't ratified the new Canadian constitution adopted by all other provinces and the federal parliament in 1982. Support for independence has ranged between 35 percent and 40 percent for most of the past thirty years, with a peak around 50 percent in the early 1990s. This movement is an expression of resistance to oppression, even if the current leadership of the movement does everything it can to appear reasonable and win over the capitalist class.

Challenges of left politics in Québec

One significant difference between the case of QS and the other Left regroupments mentioned earlier is that it was formed in a society that had no tradition of mass working-class politics. Québec has had a very militant labor movement, but the domain of electoral politics has been dominated by bourgeois and petty-bourgeois forces. This is one of the symptoms of Québec's national oppression. Successive bosses' parties have managed to prevent the creation of a significant working-class political alternative by playing the nationalist card in various ways. Most recently, this has been the pattern for the hegemony of the Parti Québécois (PQ) over the left of the political spectrum since its creation in 1968.

From the 1920s to the 1960s, several attempts were made either to rally Québec workers to a Canadian working-class party or to create an original one. Divisions over the questions of language and national self-determination played a key role in the ultimate failure of all such attempts whether by the Communist Party, the Canadian Commonwealth Federation [2] and its successor the New Democratic Party (NDP, a labor party) or the Parti Socialiste du Québec (PSQ).

In 1970, the PQ was the first party advocating for the transformation of the Québec provincial state into a sovereign country to elect members into the Québec Parliament since the rebellions of the 1830s. Hopes were high throughout the 1970s that this young party, a cross-class coalition of right and left political forces, would achieve some sort of independence. Many on the left, including revolutionary socialists, rallied to it with the stagist strategy of achieving independence first and fighting for socialism after. Others turned their backs entirely on the national struggle, calling it a bourgeois distraction. Forty years later, with two failed attempts (in 1980 and 1995) at renegotiating the relationship of Québec with the rest of Canada by way of a popular referendum mandate, the PQ has only proven that it can be a completely ordinary provincial government, implementing the same kind of pro-business policies as the federalist Liberals. In the meantime, the radical Left was

reduced to very small groups often dedicating more energy to fighting each other than fighting the Right.

For QS, this lack of a working-class political tradition has had advantages and disadvantages. On the positive side, it has contributed to the party being a direct expression of the new social movements that have emerged since the 1970s. QS is unequivocally feminist, ecologist, and for global justice (altermondialiste). It has deep roots in antipoverty groups and the student movement. Also, it has experienced very little tension and infighting caused by old divisions within the Left. On the negative side, the roots and influence of the party in the union movement are minimal and the working-class perspective is not always present in its analysis.

Struggling toward an alternative

As mentioned above, when the sovereigntist PQ was founded in 1968, most of the Left rallied around it in spite of the fact it had been created and was led by liberal and conservative politicians. The uniting factor in that coalition was the goal of achieving some type of independence for the French-speaking nation. What further cemented this alliance of Left and Right was a program of social reforms made possible by the postwar boom and a common view of “progress” that included better working conditions and expanded social services.

This started changing in the early 1980s when the PQ government, under its founding leader René Lévesque, took a sharp turn to the right as a response to the global recession. But the Left—still reeling from the collapse of sizable Maoist groups, divided by sectarianism and isolated by the defeats of the social movements—was unable to truly take advantage of the crisis in the nationalist party resulting from this new turn and the defeat of the first referendum (May 1980).

For a new politics to emerge, the decline of the old was not enough. What was needed was the rebuilding of a capacity for mass resistance to right-wing policies—which emerged when the PQ came back to power in 1994. The PQ held a second referendum on sovereignty the following year (losing by 1 percent of the vote, with over 93.5 percent turnout), and then proceeded with another right-wing turn in the name of fiscal responsibility.

The first in the new wave of popular mobilizations was the March of Women against Poverty and Violence in June 1995. Fifteen thousand women participated, which could be considered a modest mobilization by today’s standards, but was remarkable after many years of isolated struggles generally ending in defeat. That movement was organized by the Québec Women’s Federation (FFQ), chaired by Françoise David, who was to become the second QS MNA in 2012. Some of its demands were met with a favorable response; enough to give people hope that struggles could still achieve results, but not enough to renew people’s trust in the PQ government.

Then a student strike took place, mostly in the colleges, [3] in the fall of 1996 as the government was holding summit meetings to discuss how to eliminate the province’s deficit. This strike was successful in forcing the government to abandon the idea of increasing tuition fees and of introducing them in the college system.

The government-sponsored summits were also the target for large rallies uniting students with unionized workers and members of community organizations. The signing of the zero deficit pact at the second summit (October 1996) by the presidents of the main unions was met with strong criticism from the rank and file. The policy of “concertation,” or constructive dialogue between the government, bosses, and the unions, had reached its objective limit (but not the subjective one, which seems to be infinite!).

It is in that context, with brutal austerity policies enforced by a party that had enjoyed the support of many activists in the social movements, combined with large mobilizations against those policies, that the need for a political alternative became obvious to many. After a few preparatory meetings, hundreds of activists met in 1998 to create the Rassemblement pour l'alternative progressiste (RAP). But this organization had a hard time breaking completely from the PQ and only supported a handful of candidates in the general election held in November.

Meanwhile, the former Québec section of the New Democratic Party (NDP, Canada's Social-Democrats), which had changed its name to Parti de la démocratie socialiste (PDS) in order to underline its differences with the federal party (notably its support for independence), had candidates in most ridings, [4] but only garnered about 0.6 percent of the vote. A lot of work still needed to be done.

A new global movement

While RAP and PDS struggled to create an alternative to the left of the PQ, the women's movement and antipoverty groups continued building on the success of the 1995 march and worked toward a World March of Women for 2000. That event was a great success, with 40,000 participants across Québec, demonstrations in dozens of countries, and five million signatures gathered worldwide for a common set of demands.

Less than a year after the historic Seattle demonstrations against the World Trade Organization, this global movement initiated from Québec was another example of how the tide had changed and a significantly broader section of the population was no longer willing to accept neoliberal policies and inaction on pressing social issues.

Then, in April 2001, close to 100,000 people marched in Québec city against the Summit of the Americas and the proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). This mobilization united most progressive movements across Québec around a common focus (no to the FTAA) and a new sense of optimism. The fact that the PQ had supported free trade policies from the start, in the late 1980s, meant that this mobilization was incompatible with the pro-PQ strategy of the union bureaucracy and created further space for an alternative to emerge.

A few days before the summit, a by-election was held in the Montréal riding of Mercier. This could very well have been a non-event, as most by-elections usually are. But a coalition of political groups and parties (including PDS and RAP), as well as some local unions, decided to back an independent candidate under the banner of Union des forces progressiste (UFP). This candidate (Paul Cliche, a retired union staffer) got 24 percent of the vote, which sent a shockwave through the ranks of the broad Left and pushed hard toward the founding of UFP as a new party the following year.

Then opposition to the Iraq War brought to Montréal the largest demonstrations in any Western country not part of the "Coalition of the Willing," with more than 200,000 people in the street, not once but twice (February and March 2003). We now know that the Liberal Canadian government seriously considered joining said coalition but thought better of it in the face of such a mass movement. March 2003 also saw an election campaign in Québec, in which UFP got 1 percent of the vote overall, including 5,000 votes for Amir Khadir in Mercier. Khadir, a medical doctor born in Iran, became the first QS MNA five years later.

Founding a new party

In order for these threads to come together and create QS, another push had to come from social movements and the struggle. This took the form, in 2002, of a campaign against the rise of a populist right-wing party called Action démocratique du Québec (ADQ). The rise of that party in the polls signaled a new phase in the long decline of the PQ, still in government at that time. The movement against this shift to the right was called D'abord Solidaires (Solidarity First).

Then, following the election of a provincial Liberal government under Jean Charest in 2003, the activists involved, many of whom had followed the FFQ and Françoise David through the Marches of Women of 1995 and 2000, had to decide what to do next. Many of them decided to embark on the challenging process of engaging with electoral politics. This new group called Option Citoyenne (OC—Citizens Option) rapidly built a membership comparable to that of UFP and called for the founding of a new party.

Negotiations then took place through all of 2005 between UFP and OC, leading to the founding of QS in February of 2006. At the start, the party had 4,000 members and was well received among a significant segment of the public. At its first general election in 2007, it garnered close to 4 percent of the popular vote, but failed to get into the National Assembly.

The founding meeting proceeded with the election of a first coordinating committee, a collective leadership with gender parity, including Amir Khadir and Françoise David as the two spokespersons. Some individuals obviously had more influence than others in the new formation, but it consciously decided that it would not have a leader in the traditional sense.

Also of note, the initial membership of the party was very well balanced in terms of gender and generations and spread out across all regions, with a concentration in Montréal. Most of the members were of French Canadian ethnicity, descendants of the French colonists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which is also the case for about 75 percent of the Québec population. But there were also a good number of Latinos, Anglos (English-speaking Canadians), and members of various other minorities.

What does QS represent?

As this brief history clearly shows, QS was the result of a combination of two processes, which we could label convergence and emergence. On the convergence side, several organizations had to come together and overcome their differences in order to create a broader party. At the same time, new layers of activists made the leap from movement activism to electoral politics: what we can call emergence. This dual process went through several iterations before leading to the critical mass making it possible for the Left to break from its marginal position and gain the ability to get people elected in spite of the “first past the post” system.

“Uniting the Left” by itself would not have been sufficient; the move toward electoral politics by hundreds of social movement activists, sick and tired of having the doors of parliament shut in their faces, and their demands rejected out of hand in the name of the neoliberal consensus, was absolutely necessary. At the same time, the established Left groups, with their experience of electoral politics and programmatic debates, provided the frame around which these new layers of activists could get organized rapidly and meet new challenges.

What does it stand for?

The QS views on the Québec national question may seem innocuous at first glance but constitute a program for a democratic revolution, which rests on the potentially explosive convergence of the national struggle with social and environmental struggles. The key proposal in that part of the program is the election of a Constituent Assembly, which would be mandated to draft a constitution for Québec following a vast public consultation. This would be followed by a referendum asking the people to support this new constitution and make Québec an independent country.

It also distinguishes itself from the PQ by standing in complete solidarity with the struggles of indigenous First Nations (for self-government, against capitalist pillaging of resources, etc.) and committed to international solidarity. For example, QS is the only party in Québec to endorse the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) campaign on Palestine and oppose the trade agreement with Israel.

The QS election platform and its unfinished program are reflective of the complexity of its origins, the diversity of its membership, and the contradictions inherent in mass movements in a wealthy liberal capitalist society. Some of its proposals are certainly compatible with the capitalist order, like investing in green energy and public transit or defending human rights. Others are much more subversive, like the ban on lockouts or the creation of workers' cooperatives in response to plant closures.

On the spectrum of Left politics, we could position QS as radical reformist, or implicitly anticapitalist. Nothing in its program is explicitly revolutionary, but the long list of reforms and the solid principles they are based on are very far from the type of social liberal politics we have seen from Labour and Socialist parties in Europe or the NPD in Canada.

The formulation created to reflect this orientation is “going beyond capitalism” (dépasser le capitalisme). What is meant by capitalism in this expression is not very clear; neither is what going beyond it concretely means. For some members of the party, capitalism is about greed and bad policies and going beyond it means adopting good policies and limiting the influence of greedy corporations over society and governments. For others, capitalism is a global system, dominating our society and shaping the state, and going beyond capitalism means imagining and creating a post-capitalist society and a radical democracy.

So far, these two main tendencies have managed to work together very well, united against right-wing parties and austerity policies. One could qualify QS as a united front party, with reformists and revolutionaries working together to achieve common goals. But for the full dynamic of a united front to be at play, there is a need to better organize and activate the revolutionary minority. The active involvement of revolutionaries was made possible, although not encouraged, by the structure of the party. Members are allowed to form collectives, based on any type of affinity they may have, including a full political program or tradition. This makes it possible for revolutionaries to organize without being attacked for “factionalism” or accused of forming a party within the party. On the other hand, those collectives don't have delegates at party meetings or the right to put forward motions, but have the right to distribute materials, which limits their ability to influence debates and encourages members to channel their involvement in riding and regional associations instead.

In spite of that, many revolutionary socialists are involved in the party because they can see beyond the ambiguities in the program and understand that QS, being deeply rooted in the working class and oppressed groups and their struggles, is more likely to radicalize than to rally to neoliberalism when push comes to shove. But this cautious optimism is not simply a prediction. It is what socialists inside QS are working on, consciously and sometimes collectively, as with the formation of the

Ecosocialist Network (Réseau écosocialiste) in March 2013, following the massive student strike of 2012.

QS and federal politics after the Orange Wave

Québec Solidaire is involved in provincial politics and doesn't have a sister organization at the federal level. But the Canadian state cannot be ignored and the evolution of federal politics can have a significant impact on social and environmental struggles as well as on the ideological climate.

A recent development at that level which poses a challenge for the Left in Québec is the surprise election of a majority of social-democratic NDP [5] candidates in Québec ridings at the last federal election, in May 2011. This has been referred to as the Orange Wave (orange being the color associated with the NDP). It was the first time since the founding of the sovereigntist Bloc québécois (BQ) in 1990 that another party won a majority of the 75 Québec seats in the House of Commons. In fact, the BQ collapsed, with less than a quarter of the vote and only 4 seats.

For QS, federal politics pose a significant challenge. It is torn between its commitment to independence, which leads some of its members to support the sovereigntist Bloc Québécois (BQ), and its opposition to the hegemony of the procapitalist PQ in provincial politics; the activist base of the PQ and the BQ being mostly made up of the same people. In 2011, QS called for opposition to the ruling conservatives, without explicitly endorsing either the NDP or the BQ. In the next federal election, which is scheduled for November 2015, this tactical discussion will take place in a radically different context, with most incumbents being NDP and the main challenge being to deny the Conservatives another term to implement brutally antiunion and antiecological policies, as well as racist and sexist policies.

The BQ, which cannot form the federal government because of its regional and separatist nature, had been led for most of its short history by Gilles Duceppe, a former union staffer, and a team well connected to sections of the labor movement. It received the explicit and active support of the Québec Federation of Labor (FTQ, the largest union body in the province) in several elections including the last one. This means that the union movement in Québec will soon have to decide if it backs the federalist NDP, with its deep roots in the union movement across Canada, or stick to its traditional support for the sovereigntist but increasingly irrelevant BQ.

The recent announcement of the official registration of a provincial NDP in Québec could also complicate things. But there are no clear signs of this possible new division in the Québec Left becoming a real factor. Many QS activists are also involved in the NDP and so the federal NDP would have a lot to lose in alienating the QS base by engaging in provincial politics.

What next?

2014 is increasingly looking like a pivotal political year for Québec. The PQ minority government, after abandoning most of its progressive election promises and getting back to its deep commitment to neoliberal budget and economic policies, is attempting to gain political momentum by playing the identity card. Their new series of proposals for a "values charter" (now Bill 60) are taking advantage of a lack of clarity in Québec on the issue of the secular nature of the state and public institutions as well as the lack of a clear resolution to the media created "crisis" of religious accommodation in 2007, in order to foster divisions between the French speaking and historically massive Catholic majority of the population and several religious and cultural minorities, with a special emphasis on

Muslim women who wear hijabs, orthodox Jews, and Sikhs. The spearhead of that divisive tactic is the proposed ban on wearing “conspicuous religious symbols” for all workers in the public service and provincially funded institutions like schools, hospitals, and municipalities. More than 600,000 jobs would be affected by that ban.

Many analysts have agreed that this is a strategy aimed at turning the fifty-four-seat minority PQ government into sixty-three-seat or bigger majority by rallying various strands of Québec nationalism and undermining the third party, the neoliberal and moderately nationalist Coalition avenir Québec (CAQ). But this strategy has already backfired, causing divisions in the sovereignty movement and alienating many members of various minorities who can no longer identify with the PQ and its cause. The resignation of Maria Mourani (the only woman and member of a cultural minority left in the five-member caucus of the BQ), followed by her conversion to federalism, is symptomatic of this situation.

Fortunately, an increasingly vocal section of the movement for Québec independence is already denouncing that proposal as being very bad for the national cause, sacrificed for the convenience of narrow electoral calculations by the PQ.

In this new polarization between an ethnocentric and pessimistic nationalism and a progressive and pluralistic movement for independence, QS could emerge as the main party that still embodies the struggle for national liberation. Mass struggles against the integration of Québec in the oil and gas industrial complex centered around Alberta’s tar sands, which the PQ government now favors, could also play a key role in continuing the tradition of mobilizations which made QS possible and push the party to new heights. But whatever the future has in reserve, it is preferable to be facing it together in QS than isolated without it. The struggle continues.

Benoit Renaud

Further reading about Québec politics, Québec Solidaire, and the Réseau Écosocialiste

In French

www.ecosocialsime.ca - The Réseau Écosocialiste website

www.quebecsolidaire.net - Official site of Québec Solidaire

www.pressegauche.org - Main alternative news source for the Québec Left

www.leblogueursolidaire.blogspot.ca - Benoit Renaud’s blog

In English

www.rabble.ca - Main online news sources for the English-speaking Canadian Left

www.socialistproject.ca - Site of a socialist collective with some articles on Québec, including:
www.socialistproject.ca/bullet/286.php

www.socialist.ca - Online news site of the International Socialists (Canada) with ongoing coverage of Québec politics and social movements

www.rabble.ca/blogs/bloggers/nora-loreto - Blogger based in Québec city, member of Réseau Écosocialiste

www.socialistvoice.ca/?p=896 - A detailed account of the 2009 QS convention, discussing the national question and secularism

Some historical background on socialists and the Québec question

www.socialisthistory.ca/Remember/Profiles/MichelMill.htm

www.socialisthistory.ca/Docs/1961-/Quebec/Quebec-Res-1975.htm

P.S.

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<http://isreview.org/issue/92/new-party-canada>

Footnotes

[1] Canada has ten provinces and three territories, each with their own parliament. Québec is the only province with a French speaking majority, a legacy of New France (1600-1760).

[2] The Canadian Commonwealth Federation, a party created by workers and farmers during the Depression of the 1930s, on an anticapitalist but reformist program.

[3] Called Cégep (collèges d'enseignement général et professionnel), a unique Québec institution between high schools and universities.

[4] A riding is the Canadian equivalent of an electoral district in the United States.

[5] The New Democratic Party was founded in 1961 from a convergence of the old CCF, the Canadian Labour Congress, and a movement of reformist intellectuals.