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Quebec

Québec solidaire struggles to define its space in shifting political landscape

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MONTRÉAL – About 400 members of Québec solidaire met here December 9-11 in a delegated convention to debate and adopt positions on major social and cultural questions. The convention capped the third phase in a lengthy process of developing what the left-wing sovereigntist party describes as a program of social transformation. [1]

Only days earlier, the QS candidate had tripled the party's vote in a by-election in Bonaventure, a rural riding in the Gaspé region; her 9% of the popular vote (up from 3% in the 2008 general election) has inspired high hopes in the party of equivalent or better results in a Quebec general election, which could occur next year. A wave of enthusiasm swept the delegates when the candidate, Patricia Chartier, was introduced. Although she ran third (behind the Liberals, 49%, and Parti Québécois, 37%), her tally seemed to many a successful result for a small pro-independence party that is generally portrayed in the mass media as anti-capitalist.

Election expectations were definitely in the air as delegates turned their attention to education, healthcare, social welfare, housing and cultural and language policy. These are the bread-and-butter issues on which the party hopes its proposals will resonate with an electorate fed up with neoliberal austerity, cutbacks, downsizing and offloading. And they are issues with which many of the delegates are well acquainted through their own lives as teachers, students, healthcare professionals and workers, and activists in the various social movements.

The common theme of most of the adopted proposals was defense of existing public services and their accessibility free of charge in opposition to the wave of privatizations that is ravaging such services as healthcare and education. But delegates also adopted a resolution proposed by QS members in Jean-Lesage riding (Quebec City) calling for "democratic management of public services" through mechanisms of participative democracy allowing users, workers and local citizens to determine local and regional priorities and the resources to be allocated to them.

The delegates reaffirmed Québec solidaire's commitment to free-of-charge public education from kindergarten to university. They called for strengthening "a public, democratic, secular school system independent of market forces." However, by a large majority they turned down a proposal for a single public school system, voting instead in favour of a mixed system comprising both public schools financed by the state and private schools offering equivalent curriculum but without state funding. Some 20 percent of Quebec elementary and secondary students attend private schools, which are funded at present by the government. Thus, while wealthy elites may still send their children to private schools, the effect of the adopted proposal would be to stream many students into the public system.

The adopted resolutions also called for an end to shaping the curriculum of junior colleges (CEGEPs) to the job market and the interests of big business, and for freeing university research and development from corporate influences. Schools would be encouraged to propose their own curriculum, democratically decided in consultation with parents, students and staff, in addition to the official program of the Ministry.

The proposals on healthcare reflected an approach that would focus on preventive medicine and greater attention to alternative and traditional medicines. Proposed measures include strengthening front-line services in the popular local community service centres (CLSCs), enhancing home-care and restoring the public educational role of the CLSCs. A major issue is the lack of doctors in rural areas and remote regions. But delegates rejected a proposal that would impose financial penalties on doctors who leave Quebec before working five years in a region (10 in a university health centre). And on a very close vote they rejected a proposal to integrate all family doctors in CLSCs, which would effectively put them all on salary instead of fee-for-service.

A major issue in Quebec is the urgent need to strengthen French as the common language of employment and public discourse. Delegates voted for revisions to the Charter of the French Language (Law 101) that would, among other things, prohibit employers from requiring knowledge of English unless it is demonstrated that English is indispensable to the job, and to strengthen French as the language of work by extending the Charter's reach to companies with fewer than 50 employees (the current threshold). They rejected proposals to make French the sole language of instruction in the CEGEPs and universities, reflecting QS's position that students who wish to study in English do so primarily because of job requirements and that the solution lies instead in reinforcing French in the workplace.

A separate resolution was adopted on "Immigration and the French language." It outlined how recent (and often non-Francophone) immigrants could be encouraged to integrate with the French-speaking majority through such measures as increased accessibility to regulated trades and professions, affirmative hiring of immigrants in the public service, and an end to job discrimination by ethnic profiling.

On media and communications, adopted proposals included creating a Quebec public radio network, eliminating commercial advertising on public radio and TV, and creating an independent agency to supervise and regulate Quebec broadcasting (replacing the federal CRTC). A major debate occurred over the proposal to "place distribution of telecommunications under public control, including if needed complete (100%) nationalization." As one delegate noted, Quebec has the highest rates in the world for cell-phone use. In the end, however, the entire set of proposals on this topic was referred to the party's policy commission for further study.

Proposals for substituting public debate and culture in place of commercial advertising and marketing in the media, and even "complete elimination of commercial advertising," were set aside. Delegates instead called for regulations to avoid sexism, racism, violence, etc. from the media.

Québec solidaire is now on record in support of a guaranteed minimum income. In the context of a full-employment policy, the adopted resolution reads, "for anyone who is unemployed or with insufficient income, the state will provide a guaranteed and unconditional minimum income paid on an individual basis from the age of 18. This income could be complementary to income from work or other income support where these are below the established threshold." This proposal should be read in light of previous QS commitments for a substantial increase in the minimum wage and for a shorter work week without reduction in wages. However, the "established threshold" was left undefined.

Delegates selected guaranteed annual income over other options that were proposed, such as a "citizenship income" that would operate like old-age security but be paid to everyone, children included; a living wage (salaire À vie) related to skills, studies, know-how, etc.; and a "universal guaranteed social income" that would replace all tax redistribution measures and income support transfers other than family allowances.

The convention also voted in favour of establishing a universal retirement plan comprising a vastly improved Quebec Pension Plan that would replace the many private and public plans, including RRSPs. Benefits would be defined and indexed, available at age 60, and adapted to need and years worked, with supplements for low-income beneficiaries. Employee contributions would be geared to capacity to pay.

Other proposals adopted included a massive program of investment in quality social housing (public, cooperative and community), and limits on rents to no more than 25% of income.

Finance capital gets a pass

While the delegates managed, on a very tight agenda, to wade through the 65-page resolutions book, readily disposing of a mass of detailed resolutions and amendments that had previously been debated in draft form in local membership assemblies and aggregates, they seemed less comfortable with some unfinished business that had been referred to this convention from the previous one in March for lack of time. These were resolutions on “Nationalization of the banks” and a similar one on other financial institutions, and a set of resolutions addressed to tax policy.

In the wake of the developing global protests against capitalist austerity and government bailouts of the banks, it might be thought that expropriation of the banks and financial interests would be high on the agenda of a party that sometimes promises to “go beyond capitalism.” And indeed, in the lead-up to the March convention, the QS policy commission had proposed, in a draft resolution, that “to eliminate completely the influence of private financial power,” an independent Quebec would implement “a complete nationalization of the banking system.” The QS national coordinating committee (CCN) had responded, however, with a counter-proposal to nationalize banking “if and as needed,” this phrase (*au besoin*) being underlined in the resolutions booklet.

But many of the delegates at this December convention were relatively new to the party, and seemed less familiar than those in the previous convention with economic and financial questions. Also, the left-over resolutions attracted little attention in the pre-convention discussions. And this convention met in a context that was much more electoralist-oriented; QS is now an established party, much more subject to media scrutiny and criticism. (This was the first QS convention covered live by Radio-Canada television.) Opportunist pressures weigh more heavily on the members.

No less than seven options were presented and debated. Most advocated “socializing” or “nationalizing” banking and private finance (one called for complete expropriation). In the end, the convention, voting each proposal up or down in a process of elimination, simply opted “to establish a state bank, either through creation of a new institution or by partial nationalization of the banking system,” which would “compete with the private banks.” As a few delegates had noted, however, as long as most of the banking and financial industry remains privately owned, a single bank could compete with others only on much the same terms; Quebec has a vivid example of this in the *caisses populaires*, the credit unions that started as a chain of small parish-based banks but now comprise the giant Desjardins complex which largely replicates the lending and investment practices of the major chartered banks.

The proposals for “nationalization of financial institutions other than banks” were referred without debate to the policy commission for further study. And the proposals on taxation policy were referred once again to the policy commission for consideration when preparing the QS election platform. These draft proposals included placing personal incomes 30 times the minimum wage in the highest tax bracket, imposing estate taxes, shifting the tax burden from individuals to corporations, and reviewing consumption taxes as “regressive.” (In its 2008 election platform, QS called for abolishing the Quebec sales tax or at least adjusting it to meet ecological concerns.)

All said, it was hardly “a program of social transformation,” as alleged by one enthusiastic QS member. But the adopted proposals are probably a fair representation of many of the demands raised by the social movements in current struggles, and enough to distinguish Québec solidaire, as an independentist party, from the capitalist Parti Québécois.

An end to discussion on program?

At a post-convention news conference, QS president Françoise David said the party “has now adopted almost the totality of the program that shapes our vision for the next 15 years.” She and other QS leaders now plan to convert a

subsequent program convention, scheduled for April 2012, into a more modest event designed to fine-tune an election platform.

However, there are in fact many topics that have not yet been addressed in this programmatic exercise – among them, agriculture and international affairs. Québec solidaire originated amidst the mobilizations of the altermondialistes, the opponents of capitalist globalization, antiwar activists, and proponents of global justice and solidarity with progressive movements and governments around the world. David herself was best known for helping to initiate the World March of Women. The Union des forces progressistes (UFP), a QS predecessor, took strong positions in opposition to imperialist war and “free trade” agreements. These are positions that should resonate with the new generation of activist youth, “the indignés” who just recently occupied public spaces in Montréal and Quebec City in solidarity with the Occupy Wall Street movement.

It is worth noting, however, that QS does occasionally address international questions. An important initiative was taken this past summer when the QS leadership designated Manon Massé as the party’s representative on the Boat to Gaza project, in solidarity with Palestine and the Boycott, Sanctions and Divestment campaign unanimously endorsed at a previous convention. More such initiatives would be welcome.

Likewise, Québec solidaire has yet to develop its thinking on agrarian issues, or to connect in any significant way with farmers’ organizations that are fighting on behalf of “peasant agriculture” and organic farming practices. Some, such as the Union paysanne (UP), the Quebec affiliate of Via Campesina, are trying to abolish mandatory membership in the government-backed farmers organization, the Union des producteurs agricoles (UPA), which is dominated by major agribusiness interests. An agrarian program must be an integral part of any regional development strategy, and intersects closely with important environmental protest movements, including the mass movement now developing against shale gas exploration and development.

Another major area of Québec solidaire’s activity that remains largely undeveloped so far is the labour movement. Although the party adopted strong proposals on labour and trade unions at its March 2011 convention, it still lacks a consistent and coherent intervention in this milieu. A book recently published by QS leader Françoise David [2] outlining her vision for the party and Quebec scarcely mentions the organized labour movement or employment issues, although full employment and strong unions are key to achieving any serious redistribution of wealth in a capitalist society.

This lacuna has important implications for contemporary politics. The Charest government, taking advantage of recent exposures of corruption and union coercion in Quebec’s construction industry – and hoping to distract public attention from its own share of recent corruption scandals – has scapegoated construction workers by introducing legislation to abolish a longstanding practice of “placement syndical,” the union hiring hall by which jobs are allocated under the control of the respective unions the workers have chosen to represent them. Under Bill 33, workers will now be assigned to jobs by a government bureaucracy – unelected and not answerable to the workers. The main beneficiaries of Bill 33 will be the construction bosses, the very ones at the source of the industry’s corrupt practices. Yet Amir Khadir, the sole QS member of the National Assembly, did not fight the bill and was absent for the vote, when the 99 MNAs present voted unanimously in favour. A remarkable opportunity was lost for Québec solidaire to stand out as the sole defender of an important section of the Quebec working class. [3]

During a break in the convention proceedings, about 30 members, mostly trade unionists but also a few students, met in a meeting of the party’s “Intersyndicale,” an informal caucus of union members, to discuss ways to network and engage in possible future actions, especially in collaboration with student activists who are mounting a militant campaign for free education in opposition to the Charest government’s scheduled tuition fee increases. The Intersyndicale has recently published an attractive leaflet outlining the program on labour and the unions that was adopted at the March 2011 convention.

Major challenges ahead

Québec solidaire faces some imposing challenges in the coming period. The tectonic plates under Quebec's political landscape are shifting. The capitalist parties that have dominated the province's politics for the last 40 years or more are in crisis. Jean Charest's governing Liberals (the PLQ) are mired in mounting scandals, and popular discontent with the party is fueled in particular by its flagrant collaboration with the resources multinationals; yet Charest's new flagship program Plan Nord offers only further concessions to them. The Parti québécois, out of office since 2003, is bleeding profusely from the crisis that erupted in sovereigntist ranks on the heels of the New Democratic Party's "orange surge" in the May federal election. To date, a half-dozen of its MNAs have defected, most of them in opposition to PQ leader Pauline Marois' insistence on placing the fight for Quebec sovereignty on the backburner for the foreseeable future.

Meanwhile, a group of former Péquistes and Liberals led by ex-PQ minister François Legault and businessman Charles Sirois have formed a new party, Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ), which advocates putting the national question on ice for the next ten years — a position which apparently appeals to many Québécois who have abandoned hope for any change in Quebec's constitutional status for the foreseeable future. The CAQ has already absorbed the right-wing Action démocratique du Québec (ADQ) and appears to be capturing substantial support from former Liberal and PQ supporters although it has yet to contest any election.

Québec solidaire is faced with an unprecedented opportunity to mobilize support among disaffected Péquistes as the independentist party with a relatively progressive social agenda. However, under the first-past-the-post electoral system, its electoral prospects are quite uncertain, and in a multiparty context it is impossible to predict how even an electoral score of 10% or more might — or might not — translate into seats in the National Assembly. In the circumstances, the party leadership — and a portion of the membership [\[4\]](#) — continues to entertain hopes of negotiating a deal with the PQ (or possibly the Verts, the "Green" party) under which each party would agree to stand down from running a candidate in one or more ridings where the two parties are in relatively close contention, thus facilitating the election of QS candidates. Many QS members are inclined to view the PQ as a party of the "left" — not so much because of its politics, which are thoroughly neoliberal, but because QS and the PQ appeal to much the same constituency of working class voters.

In recent months both Françoise David and Amir Khadir, the party's co-leaders, have publicly spoken in favour of such a deal, to the dismay of many QS members, who voted at the party's last convention in March to reject any such "tactical alliances." With this in mind, QS militant Marc Bonhomme moved an emergency motion at the opening of the QS convention to add to the agenda a debate on the question of alliances, from the perspective of proposing that QS work instead to build a "left front," both electoral and extra-parliamentary, with the unions and popular movements "against the Right of the banks, the bosses and the parties in their pay, the PLQ-PQ-ADQ-CAQ." Bonhomme's motion was defeated. Although the vote meant there was no debate on the strategic direction for QS proposed by the motion, it does mean that the March convention's decision remains in force — as Amir Khadir later conceded to reporters who had been unaware of the vote taken in March in a closed session of that convention.

In any event, the PQ has virtually ruled out any talk of alliances. In a document on institutional reform to be debated by its National Council in January, the PQ leadership opposes any electoral reform that would offer proportional representation to parties (as proposed by Québec solidaire), and proposes instead a two-round system of voting in which, failing a majority for a candidate in the first round, the two candidates with the highest scores would face off in a second round. Given its present standing in the polls, Québec solidaire's candidates would have little chance of election except in a very few Montréal ridings under this formula.

Still unclear is the possible long-term impact on Québec solidaire of the recent gains of the NDP, now a factor in Quebec politics and not just on the federal scene. Notwithstanding QS's independentism, there is considerable

overlap in popular support and even membership of the two parties. Significantly, the QS candidate in the Bonaventure by-election, Patricia Cloutier, staffs the constituency office of the local NDP member of parliament. However, the NDP's progress in Quebec may be ephemeral; judging from recent opinion polls, its stumbling on some issues related to the national question during the recent session of the federal Parliament — such as its acquiescence to the appointment of a unilingual Anglophone Supreme Court judge and federal Auditor General, or its contradictory reactions to Quebec's exclusion from the recent multibillion dollar shipbuilding contract — is a factor in a serious decline in support in the province. The NDP's historic inability to relate to Quebec's national consciousness is demonstrated repeatedly, even on questions that may seem trivial to an uncomprehending audience in English Canada but are regarded by most Québécois as vital to their identity and existence as a minority nation within Canada.

December 16, 2011.

Thanks to Nathan Rao, like me an observer at the convention, for his input.

[1] For reports on previous program conventions, see "Quebec left debates strategy for independence" and "“Beyond capitalism”? Québec solidaire launches debate on its program for social transformation."

[2] F. David, *De colère et d'espoir* (Montréal: Ecosociété, 2011).

[3] For an excellent analysis of the issues raised by Bill 33, and a critique of Québec solidaire's silence on the matter, see "Comment comprendre l'abolition du placement syndical dans l'industrie de la construction?" by André Parizeau, the leader of the Parti communiste du Québec, a recognized collective within QS.

[4] See, for example, "Québec solidaire et les pactes tactiques : un mal nécessaire." The author, Stéphane Lessard, is a former member of the QS national coordinating committee, the party's top leadership body.