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Quebec

After Twenty Years, Québec Solidaire Faces an Existential Crisis

- Features -

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The election night in the Terrebonne bye-election, won handily by the Parti Québécois (PQ), was difficult for Québec Solidaire as well as for the Liberals and Conservatives. It was quite a plunge for Québec Solidaire, with vote share down by two-thirds.

To twist the knife in the Québec Solidaire wound, none of the spokespersons or Solidaire MPs were there to console their defeated candidate. Hello solidarity. This moral failing, this political error, reveals the disarray of the Solidaire leadership and MPs facing the party's persistent decline in popularity. For the MPs, it's becoming every person for themselves. Neither the arrival of the new spokesperson nor the priority given to the independent "New Quebec" has changed anything. Nor has the barrage of reform proposals, even if they are all more relevant than the last.

"Governance" concerns led party leader Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois to not denounce Parliament's racism

Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois's (GND) resignation a few days later dots the i's and crosses the t's on what increasingly resembles a rout. Through base electoral calculation spiced with prejudice against the Quebec working-class, GND had allowed the "Solidaire" MPs to humiliate a colleague of Arab-Muslim origin. This colleague had the audacity to point out the racist elephant, particularly Islamophobic, sitting in the National Assembly under the disguise of secularism.

With great fanfare, GND led the charge against the party's programme, claiming it was unfit for governance. Certainly, it has its faults of length, heaviness, and imbalance. However, essential passages affirm the anti-capitalism and anti-racism of the Solidaires. Everyone understands that these are the passages being targeted. Bernie Sanders understood nearly 10 years ago that in the US, the term "socialism" is electorally profitable and unifies the left and even many progressives. GND hasn't understood this. Neither have our MPs, it seems.

Centrism and party centralisation capitulate to neo-fascisation

The centralisation and bureaucratisation of the party to make it a well-oiled electoral machine leads by default to an "empty signifier" type programme in the style of populist theorist Laclau and in line with the insipid Saguenay Declaration. Should we be surprised that in such a suffocating organisation governed by "comms," the spontaneity of the exploited and oppressed finds no place? This stifling atmosphere has provoked abandonment, then the literary criticism of an MP, and the resignation of a spokesperson. Subsequently, the election by acclamation of her successor demonstrated a loss of internal democracy.

The strategic error lies in this centralising centrism. In a world existentially threatened by the climate crisis and socially polarised with a "middle class" on the verge of disappearance, this organisational centralisation that is politically centrist harks back to bygone and outdated times. Conversely, the far-right has understood this very well. It charges straight ahead towards neo-fascism without being encumbered by precedents and constitution. It attracts to itself these panicked traditional "middle classes" and the portion of those popular classes that are lost and bewildered.

Liberating speech without control would lead the party's youth towards the left

In these circumstances, liberating the speech of Solidaire's base without stifling it with pre-baked orientation texts, without locking it in webinars where dialogue is impossible, without isolating it through individual contributions would most likely result in a hard-left turn of the programme. As in the recent German election, this turn would present itself as a counterpart to the anti-immigrant neo-fascisation of the right. This extreme right-ward shift drags behind it the centrist parties whose base consists of the traditional section of the "middle classes" left behind and who dream of a return to the welfare state of yesteryear... which immigration would supposedly threaten.

The other section of these "middle classes" consists of professionals in the process of proletarianisation and young people laden with degrees but often underemployed and even unemployed. This sub-class is very present in the Solidaire leadership and among its activists, where it has partially substituted for the working class. Would the shift towards socialism be compromised? As long as this educated youth, straddling between the proletariat and the petty bourgeoisie, often sidelined from society, a minority in our ageing countries of old imperialism, remains committed to the Solidaires, it is capable of revitalising the party. Both the ardour due to its age and its awareness of the mad race towards a hothouse Earth that neo-fascisation denies and encourages lead it towards anti-capitalism as long as this perspective is socially present and alive.

In these times of both global and Solidaire turbulence, we must keep a cool head and think strategically. The German Left party (Die Linke), after years of crisis that culminated in a major split on its right, has pulled itself together. It changed its leadership and consolidated its left-wing programme focused on vital social issues (inflation, housing, austerity) without anti-immigrant discrimination. This discrimination was advocated at different levels by all other parties, even the SPD and the Greens of the outgoing government, and not just by the neo-fascist Alternative for Germany (AfD). Despite the electoral success of the AfD and the traditional right, Die Linke went from 3% of voting intentions at the beginning of the campaign to nearly 9% on election day. Along the way, it doubled its membership thanks to the massive adherence of youth, especially among women. Thanks to their contribution, Die Linke was able to organise hundreds of thousands of door-to-door canvassing visits.

Electoral plunge, abandonment, and resignation reveal a feminist critique

Is Québec Solidaire capable of such a German-style rebound? The test is not trivial since the party is experiencing its first major crisis in nearly twenty years of existence. This crisis has nothing to do with a stimulating growth crisis as the party has already experienced. The crisis of an electoralist party is first experienced as a drop in electoral score or at least in sustained voting intentions. The party's crisis had been brewing since the Jean-Talon by-election in Quebec City in autumn 2019. The leadership-MPs had then unsuccessfully tried to impose a seemingly popular candidate from a right-wing municipal party. Following this local crisis, the party's electoral score had dropped by two percentage points. Nothing dramatic but a warning sign inviting a leftward correction.

This poor result foreshadowed the stagnation of the 2022 general election, momentarily obscured by the victory in the Ste-Marie-Ste-Anne by-election in Montreal, courtesy of the collapse of the Liberals among francophones. But the setback of seven percentage points, or relatively a third, in the new Jean-Talon by-election in October 2023 would precipitate events. Shortly after this election, the publication of former MP Catherine Dorion's book, whose refusal to run again in 2022 had created unease, directly criticised GND. She attacked not the content of his speech but his leadership style. She pointed out GND's problematic relationship with the rebellious style—can we call it feminist?—that should have its place in a left-wing party. Style and dress had to be normalised to appeal to the mythical centrist and pragmatic electorate. The MPs needed to be endowed with expertise above all. Their connections to the working-class environment became secondary.

The surprise resignation of the new spokesperson Émilise in April 2024 would definitively open the major crisis of the party. The resigning spokesperson was clearly unwelcome in the MPs' inner circle. They resented her for being the

only defeated MP of the party, regardless of the fact that she had been punished by the employer-union elite of Rouyn-Noranda in Abitibi. She had played a crucial role in publicising the slow poisoning of the town's population, especially those neighbouring the Glencore copper smelter. Note that this is an issue finally taken up in the streets by the feminist organisation Mothers at the Front and publicised throughout Quebec. Is this a coincidence or rather a class-struggle manifestation reflected in the feminist unease within Québec Solidaire, whose MPs are twice as male as female?

Ecosocialism, a solidarity-based social project, concrete, simple, and inexpensive...

Isn't it an open secret that ecological, that is ecosocialist, is the socialism of the 21st century? This ecosocialism has nothing to do with pharaonic state projects like hydroelectric cathedrals in the North, giant wind farms in the North of the South, or aerial trains and metros in the South. The construction of eco-energy social housing, that is, outside the market and with (quasi)-zero energy consumption, for everyone and not just for the poor, addresses all three crises of inflation, housing, and climate.

Replacing the solo (SUV) car, both petrol and electric, on our streets and roads with wall-to-wall public transport, complemented by car-sharing, also helps solve the climate crisis. This public transport draws its electricity from the hydroelectric "negawatts" of buildings restored through a major collective effort. Finally, it solves the crisis of urban sprawl devouring the best agricultural land in the Montreal plain and at the same time the alienating urban congestion and energy price inflation. Without these two major sources of debt—private housing and the solo car—households can breathe again while being able to contribute more fiscally.

The essential funding will come from elsewhere, however. As a famous bank robber from the 1930s said when asked why he limited himself to these very risky thefts, "the money is in the banks." I would add not only in Quebec and Canada but also in those of tax havens. Moreover, without great useless projects including those of geoengineering and the exponential growth of server farms, ecosocialism is inexpensive. To complete the picture of the joint struggle for climate justice and social justice, vegetarian food, climatically indispensable but unpopular, can be encouraged by a policy of administered prices, that is, freed from the grip of the market. This policy would subsidise basic vegetarian foods at the expense of the price of meats and ultra-processed foods full of sugar, fat, and salt, the latter eventually becoming banned. Let's add an agricultural policy supporting bio-agriculture at the expense of the currently heavily subsidised agro-industry.

All these policies, simple to understand and simple to explain, establish a caring and connecting solidarity society in strong material degrowth that breaks the austerity of public services. By distributing mandatory work that has become less constraining because it's freed from the mass consumption generated by capitalist accumulation, these policies free up time for science, art, and the participatory democracy required by democratic planning. And they lift all socio-economic and ideological restrictions on internationalist welcome and support.

These are the policies that should be at the heart of the Solidaire programme, its hard core. The GHG reduction objectives derived from the IPCC's scientific analysis and the equity principles of the Rio Summit, namely for Quebec a two-thirds reduction by 2030 if not 2035, would become realistic. Not only would these policies appear as a politically serious alternative to the dead-end path of green capitalism à la Québécoise made of battery sector and electric solo cars, but they would also show a strategy of solidarity growth of well-being for all.

...which in return requires the political courage to confront fascising capitalism

In return, these policies will encounter on the path of the struggle for their implementation the barrier of private

ownership of the means of production, which can only retain their value by accumulating profit. As Marx said (Capital, Volume 3, Chapter 47): "Large-scale industry and large-scale mechanised agriculture work together. If at first they are distinguished by the fact that the former lays waste and ruins labour-power and thus the natural power of man, whereas the latter does the same to the natural power of the soil, they join hands in the end, inasmuch as the industrial system applied to agriculture also enervates the workers there, while industry and trade for their part provide agriculture with the means of exhausting the soil."

Now, no longer able to rely on the veil of parliamentary democracy, this capitalism appears in its fascising nakedness. The necessity of overthrowing capitalist domination imposes itself, which will come through the pressure of the accumulation of struggles for reforms combined with the rise of ecosocialist consciousness. This gigantic struggle will culminate in one country or another, which will lead the others. Why not in the country of "New Quebec," which from a small people could thus become "something like a great people"?

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This article translated by Adam Novak for [ESSF](#) from www.marcbonhomme.com.

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