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Quebec

Québec Solidaire - the new option in Québec politics

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In a groundbreaking development on the Québec political scene, more than 1,000 activists turned out on the weekend of 4-5 February 2006 in Montréal to found Québec Solidaire, a left-wing political party backing a multi-ethnic, inclusive, sovereign Québec, feminism, ecology, participatory democracy, support for aboriginal struggles, social justice and a global-justice internationalist perspective.

[<https://npa31.org/IMG/jpg/spokespersons.jpg>]

Amir Khadid and Francoise David

Québec Solidaire is the outcome of a merger between Option citoyenne and Union des forces progressistes, totalling about 4,000 members, with approximately equal numbers of women and men. [1] Québec Solidaire aims to rally progressive forces across the broad left of the Québec political spectrum, providing a class alternative to the bourgeois-nationalist PQ - Parti Québécois and the bourgeois federalist PLQ - Parti libéral du Québec (Québec Liberal Party) as well as the right-wing nationalist ADQ - Action démocratique du Québec (Québec Democratic Action).

The history of the left in Québec over the last 50 years has been marked by the absence of a labour party. The founding of Québec Solidaire represents a politically credible potential mass party. Historically the NDP (New Democratic Party) and the CP (Communist Party), class-based parties that exist in English Canada, have never developed beyond a marginal presence in Québec, due to their lack of understanding or sidelining of the significance of Québec national oppression. This allowed the bourgeois-nationalist Parti Québécois to almost monopolise the progressive political terrain.

Founded in 1968, the PQ was not a social-democratic party based on the trade unions but a nationalist party led by a modernising tendency, with an electoral base in the working and popular classes. Left groups did grow in the 1960s and 1970s; the largest of these, PCO/WCP and En Lutte/In Struggle were Maoist. The Trotskyist groups were smaller but did play a significant role in workers', women's and other social struggles. All of these far-left groups either broke up or went into decline after the first, defeated, referendum on Québec sovereignty held by the PQ in 1980.

Not until the 1990s did political developments lead to pressures for unity of the left to form an alternative to the PQ. With the PQ in power, carrying out neoliberal cutbacks, a series of mass mobilisations took shape. These included the Bread and Roses Women's March in 1995, student mobilisations in 1996 and the nurses' strike in 1999. A second wave of mobilisations began with the global social justice World March of Women Against Poverty and Violence in 2000. This was followed in 2001 by the mass organisation and mobilisation against the Summit of the Americas held in Québec City, with the 60 000 person Peoples' March uniting all the social movements against the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas.

In 1995, NDP-Québec, an organisation of several hundred members, abandoned its federalist outlook and opened its ranks to left-wing organisations. Two groups answered the appeal - the left-nationalist group around Paul Rose and the revolutionary Marxists in Gauche Socialiste, the section of the Fourth International. [2] Debates in NDP-Q led to the formation of PDS - Parti de la démocratie socialiste, an explicitly anti-capitalist, anti-neoliberal, feminist, internationalist, and pro-independence party in 1996. Judging that this explicitly anti-capitalist stance too extreme as a basis for a mass party, other left-wing supporters of Québec independence sought to rally the social and political left of Québec into RAP (Rassemblement pour une Alternative Politique / Assembly for a Political Alternative) in 1998. RAP attracted significant votes in the 1998 elections but failed to elect a candidate, leading to a call for social movements and progressive forces to unite in a single organisation. The UFP (Union des forces progressistes) was

thus founded in 2002 through the merger of PDS (Parti de la démocratie socialiste), RAP (Rassemblement pour l'alternative progressiste), and the PC (Parti communiste du Québec) with the Québec branch of the International Socialists joining later.

In 2003, the Jean Charest-led PLQ won the provincial elections, while the right-wing ADQ got 18% of the vote and 4 deputies. In response, a collective of 22 progressive women and men - including Françoise David, World March of Women spokesperson in 2000 - organised a popular education campaign promoting a critical understanding of the various parties' programmes. This was the beginning of D'abord solidaires - (Solidarity First). In November 2003, D'abord solidaires split into 3 components. The largest of these, led by Françoise David, created a political movement known as Option citoyenne (OC). OC defined itself as - "a movement of Quebecers who have decided to take part in party politics to advocate social justice, sexual equality, environmentally-friendly development and solidarity among peoples. Our goal is to broaden and unite left-wing political forces to field candidates in the next provincial election". [3] The first task was a cross-Quebec tour, meeting all progressive movements to listen to and get a sense of citizen's concerns. Many World March of Women activists joined OC, convinced of the need to go beyond counting on social movements alone to achieve the demands put forth by the March. At the Option citoyenne convention in Autumn, 2004, the leadership was convinced of the need to unite the left in Québec, making an appeal to the Verts (Green Party) and the UFP. Only the UFP responded.

These UFP-OC negotiations culminated in Québec Solidaire's founding congress, based on a common statement of principles, [4] organisational statutes that include a 50% female leadership at all levels, not just for electoral candidates, and the election of a national coordinating committee - consisting of nine women and seven men. The debate is now open on the new party's programme and electoral platform. This will be determined at the next congress, planned for 2007. Québec Solidaire has two official spokespersons, Françoise David and Amir Khadir, from OC and UFP respectively.

The key debates for the coming year will centre on the national question and how important a role electoralism will play in the new party. While sharing a non-federalist outlook, there is a wide range of views on the importance and strategy for the self-determination of Québec within Québec Solidaire. Without viewing Québec independence as a goal in itself, Québec Solidaire sees sovereignty as a means to achieve its social project. Unlike the PQ, most Québec Solidaire members feel social issues must be dealt with now, not put off until sovereignty is achieved. "It doesn't interest us to transform the G8 in which Canada takes part, into a G9," Khadir said. Sovereignty, for Khadir, is "a means of resistance to the power of corporate globalisation." [5]

With elections coming within a year, the question of an entente with the PQ will certainly come up. The federalist and right-wing Liberals hope the PQ will lose votes on its left to Québec Solidaire. Françoise David said that while QS supporters don't want to see Charest's Liberals form the next government, she had little concern about splitting the sovereigntist vote. Referring to the PQ's 1976 programme, advocating proportional representation, "The Parti Québécois had 30 years to bring in proportional voting. So it's a little late to tell us that we're going to divide the vote," she said. "We bring a new alternative. We bring values like solidarity, ecology, equality between men and women and I think we are the only party that brings that," said Françoise David.

[1] While the websites are in French, there are English translations of some documents.

Québec solidaire <http://www.quebecsolidaire.net/accueil>

Union des forces progressistes <http://www.ufp.qc.ca/>

Option citoyenne <http://www.optioncitoyenne.ca/>

[2] http://www.ufp.qc.ca/article.php3?id_article=1008 / <http://www.lagauche.com/lagauche/index.php>

[3] http://www.optioncitoyenne.ca/en_home.php

[4] http://www.dernier-recours.org/assets/files/english/congres_de_fondation/en_projet_declaration_principes.pdf

[5] <http://thelink.concordia.ca/article.pl?sid=06/02/06/196257>