

Quebec's ruling elite responds to Trump's threats with trepidation and an orgy of nationalism

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23 January 2025

Quebec's capitalist ruling elite and its political representatives, who are divided into pro-federalist and pro-Quebec independence factions, have been shaken by President Donald Trump's threats against Canada, just like their counterparts across the country.

A common element in their diverse responses has been reactionary flag-waving nationalism, with the federalists brandishing the Maple Leaf in one hand and Quebec's Fleurdelisé in the other.

Trump has threatened to impose 25 percent tariffs on all Canadian imports as early as February 1, under the pretext that Washington's northern neighbour isn't doing nearly enough to secure the border and prevent a supposedly massive flow of immigrants and fentanyl into the US.

Trump has also warned Ottawa that in order to maintain the military-strategic alliance with the Washington that for the past three-quarters of a century has enabled the Canadian ruling class to share in the spoils of US imperialist dominance and aggression around the world, it must shoulder a greater share of the "burden," by hiking its military spending to at least 2 percent of GDP. Trump has already indicated that this target could quickly rise to 5 percent, and there is now a general consensus among the ruling elites in all the NATO powers that the 2 percent figure is no more than a "floor" beyond which much more spending will be needed.

The newly-inaugurated US president has also threatened to use "economic force" to annex Canada and make it the 51st state of the United States.

Trump's threats come in the context of US imperialism's strategic conflict with Russia and China, and its drive to create a Fortress North America. Trump has indicated that annexing Canada would provide protection against "the Russian and Chinese ships that constantly surround us."

To increase its grip on the North American continent and better position American imperialism to take on its international rivals, Trump has also threatened Mexico with tariffs and invasion, while warning that he may take control of Greenland and the Panama Canal by military force.

Trump's threats, which contributed to the resignation of Canada's Liberal Prime Minister Justin Trudeau earlier this month, have caused panic in ruling class circles across the country because of Canadian imperialism's economic and strategic dependence on the United States.

According to Quebec's Ministry of Economy, in 2023 Quebec's exports to the US accounted for 73.6 percent of its total exports, roughly equal to the percentage of exports from Canada as a whole to the US (77 percent.)

Quebec's hard-right premier, multi-millionaire and former Air Transat CEO François Legault of the Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ), has pointed to the integration of North America's economy to demonstrate the devastation that Trump's tariffs would cause, using the aerospace industry

as an example. "There are airplane parts that circulate 4 or 5 times between Quebec and the US before the plane is finished," said Legault. "It's certain that if each time there's a 25-percent tariff added, well, it doesn't work." He went on to mention the possible loss of 100,000 jobs in Quebec.

Faced with such a threat, which would profoundly undermine its economic interests while having a radicalizing effect on workers' struggles, the Quebec ruling class is seeking to strengthen its political and ideological grip on the working class with the fraudulent argument that workers should form a united front with their "own" bosses to defend "Quebec's interests."

This is a trap that Quebec workers must reject with contempt. Their real interests—that is their class interests—are diametrically opposed to those of big business and the Quebec bourgeoisie.

The ruling elite has repeatedly waved the nationalist flag of "Quebec's interests" to justify the most sweeping attacks on the working class.

Examples include the massive social cuts of the 1990s that were implemented by the Bouchard-Landry Parti Québécois government, as part of its "zero deficit" policy, and with the aim of creating "winning conditions" for a third referendum on Quebec independence after its narrow loss in 1995.

More recently, at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the trade union bureaucracy fully supported the Legault government under the pretext that the health emergency required "national unity," thus providing political cover and support for the government's homicidal policy of prioritizing profits over human lives under the slogan of "living with the virus."

This is the same reactionary argument that underlies the current deluge of criticism directed by Quebec nationalist forces against Ottawa for supposedly putting the interests of Ontario and Alberta ahead of Quebec's.

The most belligerent nationalist response to Trump's threats has come from Quebec's pseudo-left party and second opposition party in the National Assembly, Québec Solidaire (QS). As a full-throated promoter of Quebec independence and nationalism, QS collaborates closely with the Parti Québécois, the traditional pro-independence party of Quebec's ruling class, which has imposed draconian capitalist austerity whenever it has come to power and is today a rabid advocate of anti-immigrant chauvinism.

It was QS that first raised the idea of using Quebec's hydroelectricity electricity exports to the US as leverage in negotiations with Trump. QS co-spokesperson Ruba Ghazal declared that a QS-led government would put an end to the "tariff privileges" enjoyed by certain American states. Displaying the contempt for workers and toxic nationalism that characterize this affluent middle-class party, Ghazal added that "[i]t will be up to Donald Trump to explain to his constituents why it costs them

more than before to heat their homes in winter.”

While saying that he was prepared to impose such retaliatory measures, Legault asserted his “first choice” was to “make sure there are no tariffs” and that he was prepared “to do everything” to achieve that result—including implementing the ultra-reactionary policies demanded by Trump to militarize the Canada-US border.

This would be no great concession, since Legault and the rest of Quebec’s establishment are already waging a virulent anti-immigrant campaign that combines a raft of measures aimed at restricting immigration with a far-right discourse that blames immigrants for all economic and social ills.

Quebec’s establishment is also unanimous in its support for the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, Washington and Ottawa’s provocations against China and the genocide being waged by Israel, America’s attack dog in the Middle East, against the Palestinians.

As part of his attempt to appease Trump, Legault is urging Ottawa to follow through on Trump’s demands for a massive increase in military spending. He observed that NATO “has set itself the objective that all its member countries spend 2 percent of their GDP on defense,” and deplored that Canada is “lagging behind on this point.” The Quebec Premier then called on Ottawa to “demonstrate that it is serious about this issue,” while pointing out that “Quebec will also benefit, since we have several very successful companies in the field of Defense.”

Quebec’s ruling elite and the Canada-US geostrategic partnership

Since the start of the Second World War, Canada’s military-strategic and economic partnership with the United States has been the cornerstone of its global position, and a source of profits, market access and influence for the Canadian bourgeoisie, including its Quebec wing.

The Canadian and Quebec ruling elite, therefore, consider it essential that they help shore up US imperialist global hegemony, to which their own predatory interests are inextricably tied. Faced with Trump’s threats to jeopardize this partnership, the main concern of the Canadian bourgeoisie, including both its Quebec federalist and pro-independence factions, is to negotiate the most advantageous possible position within Trump’s Fortress America.

But while Legault and his Quebec “nationalist-autonomist” CAQ are open to working with the federal government and the other provinces to conclude a revised Canada-US partnership under Trump, the more nationalist sections of the Quebec ruling class are looking to take advantage of the situation to conclude a separate agreement with Washington and promote Quebec independence.

The Quebec separatist movement, which speaks for those sections of the Quebec capitalist class that believe they can best advance their interests through a capitalist *République du Québec*, has always sought a direct alliance with Washington.

In the 1980s, it strongly favored a free trade agreement between Canada and the US, calculating that this would serve to reduce the influence of Bay Street and Anglo-Canadian capital within Quebec and the reach of the federal state.

During the 1995 referendum, its two principal spokesmen—then PQ Premier Jacques Parizeau and Bloc Québécois leader and Parizeau’s successor, Lucien Bouchard—were at pains to reassure Washington that an independent Quebec would be a member of NATO, NORAD and NAFTA, and a no less loyal junior partner than Ottawa.

The current head of the pro-independence Parti Québécois, Paul St-Pierre Plamondon, responded to Trump’s threats with a fury of reactionary nationalist rhetoric. He called on Legault to create a “Team

Quebec” made up of representatives of all sections of the ruling class and wealthy middle classes, who have a common interest in “protecting the Quebec economy,” i.e., the profits of Quebec Inc.

Then, seizing on Alberta Premier Danielle Smith’s visit to Trump’s Mar-a-Lago compound in Florida and her subsequent refusal to sign a joint statement of the country’s federal and provincial first ministers as a pretext, St-Pierre Plamondon loudly proclaimed that the interests of English Canada are incompatible with those of Quebec and demanded that Legault enter into separate negotiations with Trump.

As a chauvinist and nationalist firebrand, St-Pierre Plamondon sets the tone for the anti-immigrant, xenophobic policies of Quebec’s ruling class. Like Legault, he hasn’t hesitated to endorse Trump’s anti-immigrant and militaristic policies, claiming that the fascist and would-be dictator was right in saying “that North America is poorly protected and that Canada has systematically failed to meet its obligations, both military and border-related, over the past decades.”

Québec Solidaire provides political cover for the PQ’s turn to the far right by claiming that its nationalism is not “intolerant” and that its anti-immigrant rhetoric is part of “a legitimate debate.” Like the Parti Québécois, QS has used Trump’s threats to promote Quebec independence. The party argues that “Ottawa’s lack of leadership” in the conflict with Trump is “a reason for Quebec independence” and that an “independent Quebec could better uphold its interests in a trade war” with the United States.

Having thrown off its “progressive” mask, the pro-Quebec independence movement is now explicitly basing itself on chauvinist nationalism and ethnic exclusivism. Its promoters, like the federalist faction represented by Legault and the Quebec Liberal Party, are willing to strike a deal with the fascist Trump to intensify militarism and attacks on immigrants and the working class as a whole.

The corporatist union apparatus, which is rooted in nationalism and capitalism, fully supports the turn to trade war and the waging of imperialist war around the world. The president of the Quebec Federation of Labour, the province’s largest trade union body, summed up the reactionary response of the entire union bureaucracy to Trump’s threats by pleading for a “common front with business and political leaders to make the country stand up to Donald Trump’s threats.”

This only confirmed the unions’ willingness to impose on working people the very measures demanded by the ruling class to keep Canada and Quebec “competitive” on the world market, and especially the US market under the second Trump administration. This means the gutting of tens of thousands of jobs, massive tax cuts for the rich and corporations, the dismantling of public services and sweeping attacks on workers’ democratic and social rights.

Quebec workers, like those in the rest of Canada, the US and Mexico, have no interest in being drawn into a trade and military war in which they will be the main victims. Nor do they have an interest in supporting any reactionary agreements between Canada (or Quebec) and the US and Mexico, such as the USMCA or its predecessor NAFTA, which will always be dictated by the interests of the major banks and corporations.

On the contrary, Quebec workers must unite with their class brothers and sisters across Canada, the US, Mexico and elsewhere, in the fight to defend jobs, public services and workers’ rights, and oppose imperialist war. This can only be done as part of a common struggle against capitalism and its outmoded system of rival nation-states, and for the establishment of the Socialist United States of North America.



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