

Quebec student strike at the crossroads

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The five-month-long strike by Quebec students against university tuition fee hikes and the students' courageous defiance of Bill 78—legislation that criminalizes the strike and restricts the right to demonstrate—have shaken the provincial Liberal government and the entire Canadian ruling class. Nonetheless, the fate of the strike hangs in the balance.

The government is using the three-month suspension of the winter term imposed under Bill 78 to prepare for an unprecedented police mobilization when the strike-bound universities and CEGEPs (pre-university and technical colleges) reopen in mid-August.

The trade unions are systematically isolating the strike and working for its defeat. No sooner was Bill 78 adopted than Quebec's labor federations declared they would obey it, including provisions that legally compel them to do everything in their power to ensure that teachers and other university and CEGEP personnel assist the government in breaking the strike.

The New Democratic Party (NDP), the party of the trade unions in English Canada, has refused to even nominally support the students or to oppose Bill 78 on the spurious grounds these are "provincial matters."

Quebec's unions and the student associations most directly under their influence are seeking to divert the strike and the wider opposition movement that erupted against Bill 78 behind the election of the big business Parti Quebecois. "After the streets, to the ballot box," trumpets the Quebec Federation of Labour (QFL), the province's largest union body.

Students and workers in Quebec, across Canada and around the world must draw the lessons of the past five months. The students' demand for education to be recognized as a social right has brought them into headlong conflict not only with Quebec's Liberal government, but with the entire Canadian ruling class, its courts and police.

This is because the strike has challenged—if, as of yet, only implicitly—the basic strategy of the ruling class in Canada and around the world. Everywhere, big business and its political representatives are determined to make the working class pay for the deepest crisis of world capitalism since the Great Depression through the destruction of public services and massive cuts in jobs and wages.

To prevail in their struggle, students must make their challenge to the ruling class's austerity agenda explicit. They must broaden their struggle politically and geographically by making it the catalyst for a working class counteroffensive in Quebec and across North America in defence of all jobs and public services, and for the development of an independent political movement of the working class directed at bringing to power workers' governments.

Only the working class can break the stranglehold of big business over socioeconomic life by radically reorganizing the economy so as to make social need, not private profit, the animating principle.

The perspective of the student associations, including CLASSE, the association that initiated the strike and led the defiance of Bill 78, has manifestly failed.

The student associations insisted that the government could be pressured into dropping the tuition hikes through a single-issue protest campaign that separated the students' struggle from any broader challenge to the austerity agenda of the Quebec Liberal and federal Conservative governments. But far from ceding to protests, the Quebec Liberal government resorted to unprecedented police repression, culminating in the adoption of Bill 78.

With many students pressing for a broadening of the strike in answer to Bill 78, CLASSE raised the call for a "social strike." This call, however, represents a continuation of CLASSE's middle-class protest orientation, not a break with it.

A concept promoted by the Convergence of Anti-Capitalist Struggles and other anarchist groups, the so-called "social strike" is a wider protest, potentially including some form of limited job action by workers. It is, however, the antipode to a political general strike aimed at bringing down the Charest Liberal government and developing the struggle for workers' governments committed to socialist policies.

For the unions, anything that smacks of a political job action, even if for a day, is anathema. In late May, QFL President Michel Arsenault wrote to the Canadian Labour Congress to warn against the "radicals" promoting a social strike and demand that the unions in English Canada deny the students support. Louis Roy, the president of the Confederation of National Trade Unions, Quebec's second largest union federation, delivered a public dressing down to a CLASSE spokesman after he spoke in favor of a social strike at a forum on which they were co-panelists.

Faced with this opposition, CLASSE ceased all talk of a social strike. Its leaders made no mention of it at the mass demonstrations held in Montreal and Quebec City on June 22, and in the ensuing three weeks said virtually nothing publicly about the strike.

On Thursday this silence ended. CLASSE issued a "manifesto" that shows its leaders have learned nothing from the past five months and are rapidly becoming an appendage to the unions in the strike's betrayal.

The manifesto acknowledges that the student strike has gone far beyond the issue of tuition fee increases, claiming it has become a "popular struggle" for the democratization of Quebec. It is full of talk about the "people," while making only the most cursory mention of the working class, which it dismisses as only one among a long list of oppressed and "marginal" groups.

It makes no reference to capitalism, let alone the world capitalist crisis and the working-class resistance it is provoking, from Greece, to Spain to Egypt. Indeed, no developments beyond the borders of Quebec merit mention in the CLASSE manifesto, although Quebec students are well aware of the massive debt loads faced by US students and frequently mention it as a reason for their fight.

Despite the exclusive focus on Quebec, the eight-page manifesto fails to mention the Parti

Quebecois and the unions' drive to liquidate the strike and transform it into a campaign to return the PQ—which carried out the greatest social spending cuts in Quebec history—to power.

The concluding sentence makes reference to the social strike, but in a manner that suggests even the prospect of a wider protest is more a hope than an aim. It says not a word as to who will carry it out, when, or toward what end. Clearly CLASSE is yet again ceding to the pressure of the unions, which it continues to promote as genuine workers' organizations and allies of the students.

The day before they issued their manifesto, several CLASSE leaders met QFL President Arseneault, reputedly to discuss his letter to the CLC demanding that it isolate the striking students. At the meeting's conclusion, CLASSE communications secretary Ludvig Moquin-Beaudry said the QFL had reiterated its support for the strike, adding "we believe they are in good faith."

The QFL "supports" the student strike like a rope supports a hanged man. The unions in Quebec as around the world are not workers' organizations, but rather auxiliaries of big business and the state in suppressing the working class. The mobilization of the working class will not take place through these pro-capitalist organizations, but only through a political and organizational break with them and the development of new organs of working-class struggle.

The Quebec student strike must be relaunched on a socialist perspective. Students will be able to answer the campaign of state repression directed against them and secure their just demand for education to be recognized as a social right only by turning to the broadest layers of the working class, breaking out of the narrow Quebec framework to which their struggle has been confined, and fighting for the development of an independent political movement of the working class armed with a socialist and internationalist program.

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