Quebec: Student strikes exemplify mounting social discontent

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Eighty thousand university and junior and vocational college (CEGEP) students are on strike in the province of Quebec and the movement is expected to swell in the next few days. With students at Montreal's Concordia University, the École Polytechnique de Montréal, and other institutions having voted to stage a one-day walkout Wednesday, some 200,000 post-secondary students will be on strike March 16. There have also been walkouts at several high schools in working-class districts of Montreal.

The immediate cause of the student strike—Quebec's largest since 1968—is outrage over a $103 million per year cut in the provincial government's student bursary program, which provides grants to the poorest post-secondary students. Since 1996, Parti Québécois (PQ) and Liberal provincial governments have cut more than $300 million from the bursary program, forcing students to accept loans and mounting debt, abandon their studies, or try to combine studies with part-time and even full-time work.

While the bursary cut has been the catalyst for the student protests, they exemplify a deeper and much wider current of popular opposition to the provincial Liberal government of Jean Charest, the neo-liberal program that all levels of government and all parties have pursued on behalf of big business, and the US invasion and occupation of Iraq.

The Liberals were elected in April 2003, after mounting a campaign that appealed to popular discontent over the PQ government's cuts to health care, education, and other public and social services. At the same time, the Liberals won the support of big business by promising that they would "re-engineer" the state, though privatization and deregulation, and cut corporate and personal income taxes by an additional $1 billion per year for five years, for a total of $15 billion.

Needless to say, the Liberals have failed to make good on their promises to massively reinvest in public services. They have, however, pressed forward with their right-wing agenda, gutting a section of the labor code that restricted employers' power to contract out work, adopting legislation to promote public-private sector partnerships in the building of infrastructure and the management and provision of public services, and slashing funding for virtually every government department.

In the weeks before the 2003 Quebec election, hundreds of thousands of workers and youth took to the streets of Montreal and smaller Quebec cities to oppose the impending US invasion of Iraq. In November-December of that year, widespread worker protests erupted over the Charest government's pro-employer amendments to the labor code and a spate of other socially regressive measures. To retain control over the spreading strike movement, the leaders of the major union federations had to threaten to organize a one-day general strike, then used the Christmas holidays and passage of the Liberal measures to smother any further worker action.

Since then there have been repeated indices of a deep, but largely latent current of popular opposition to the Charest Liberal government and the agenda of big business. The union officialdom, meanwhile, has responded to the deepening popular alienation from the political establishment by redoubling its efforts to resuscitate the big business, pro-Quebec independence PQ. Like their counterparts in English Canada, the Quebec union bureaucracy uses the fact that under Canada's constitution responsibility for social policy generally falls to the provinces to quarantine within their respective provinces the numerous struggles that

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have broken out against the dismantling of public and social services.

Initially the Charest Liberals took a hard line against the student strike, threatening during its first days late last month that if it continued much longer the semester would be cancelled. This was in keeping with the government's efforts to reassure big business that it has not lost its nerve in the face of the popular opposition to its right-wing policies. Just days before the strike erupted, Charest fired Finance Minister Yves Séguin and replaced him with a former Quebec Chamber of Commerce president, an outspoken proponent of tax cuts, Michel Audet. Séguin had reportedly balked at delivering $1 billion more in tax cuts in the coming budget, saying that would require savage cuts to government services.

In recent days, however, the Charest government has softened its stance and signalled that it will take advantage of an injection of federal government money from Ottawa's Millennium Scholarship Program to restore some, if not all, of the $103 million in the coming fiscal year.

Education Minister Jean-Marc Fournier has also indicated that behind-the-scenes negotiations are underway with representatives of two student associations that have close ties to the Liberals and the PQ, the FEUQ and the FCEQ. At the same time Fournier has used trumped-up charges of student violence to declare that the government will have nothing to do with a third, more radical student association, the *Association pour une solidarité syndicale étudiante*, which initiated the strike movement and is demanding not just the restoration of the $103 million cut from the bursary program but free post-secondary education as well.

The change in the government's stance came after a spate of unfavorable newspaper editorials and commentaries. It is not that the corporate media doesn't want the government to press forward with its agenda of privatization and tax cuts. But it believes that the Charest government is choosing the wrong battles and thereby unnecessarily contributing to a "radicalization" that makes it more difficult to raze what remains of the welfare state. Wrote *La Presse* columnist Alain Dubuc, "There certainly are cases where the state, for important stakes, must be ready to confront strong opposition movements. But it must choose its battles because each crisis reduces its margin for maneuver."

In this instance, the corporate media believes the government should be laying the groundwork for scrapping the freeze on university tuition fees, rather than fanning popular opposition by imposing a measure that so clearly penalizes the poorest sections of society.

So limited is the demand for the restoration of the $103 million from the bursary program, it has been taken up by both opposition parties—the PQ, which when in power carried out the deepest cuts in Quebec history, and the Action Démocratique du Québec (ADQ), a right-wing populist party that, in the name of Quebec nationalism and provincial autonomy, argues for the "right" to private health care.

The restoration of the $103 million will in and of itself do little for students, especially as the government will finance it through cuts to other public and social services. According to press reports the cabinet is presently drafting a further $500 million in emergency cuts and has indicated to negotiators for the 450,000 Quebec public sector workers who have been without a contract since July 2003 that their wages will be frozen in the coming year.

The student strikes and the crisis of the Charest government underscore that in Quebec as elsewhere in Canada, the big business offensive against the working class has rested on a very narrow social base. What has time and again enabled big business to impose its program in the face of massive popular opposition is the action by those organizations that ostensibly speak for working people, the trade unions and the social-democratic New Democratic Party, to suppress the class struggle.

The key to unleashing the political power and creative potential of the working class is to arm it with a socialist and internationalist program that rejects the subordination of human needs to the profits of big business and strives to unite working people in a common struggle against capitalism across state borders and continents.

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