

Quebec student strike widens

Guy Charron
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Quebec's student strike, which began with the walkout of 30,000 university and CEGEP (junior college) students February 23, has now entered its seventh week.

Well over 150,000 students are currently on strike and students at virtually every university and most CEGEP campuses in the province have participated in the strike for at least a day. With polls showing that more than two-thirds of Quebecers support the students' demand for the restoration of the \$103 million a year that the provincial Liberal government has cut from the grants (bursaries) given to low-income students, the strike has grown more militant.

In recent days, striking students have blocked access to the port of Montreal, disrupted highway traffic, occupied the offices of the Conseil du patronat (the principal employer association) and briefly taken over the offices of Liberal ministers and members of the provincial legislature.

On March 23, some forty students protested outside the headquarters of the Fédération des travailleurs du Québec (FTQ), the province's largest union federation. The students mounted their picket line to protest remarks by FTQ President Henri Massi, in which he urged the students to give up their demand that the full \$103 million be restored no later than the 2005-06 fiscal year. "It's clear," declared Massi March 22, "that the student associations will have to make compromises. One can't settle things without compromise. I suggest they make compromises." Massi then called on students to give their leaders "a little maneuvering room to negotiate."

The leaders of the FTQ and other union federations have voiced their support for the student strike, but this support, as Massi's remarks demonstrate, is utterly hollow. Although 450,000 public and para-public sector workers are currently facing major concession demands from the Charest Liberal government and the Liberals have announced plans to push for the privatization of basic public services, there has never been any question of the unions using the student strike to develop a broader social mobilization in defence of health care, public education, and public and social services. Rather the labor bureaucrats have voiced support for the student strike, so as not to appear to be out of step with the anti-government mood of the population, and more importantly, in the hopes that by helping to end the strike they can demonstrate to the government that they remain important social actors with whom the Liberals should more regularly consult and work.

For more than thirty years, the union bureaucracy in Quebec has worked hand-in-glove with big business and the state to ensure "social peace" and the competitiveness of Quebec's economy. The most glaring example of the impact of this tri-partite collaboration on the working class was the union leaders' active support for the Parti Québécois' drive under Lucien Bouchard to eliminate the province's annual budget deficit through steep social spending cuts. Indeed, it was the union leaders who proposed an early retirement scheme that

enabled the government to eliminate ten of thousands of public sector jobs. This had a huge adverse impact on the quality of public health care and education.

However, the Charest Liberal government, which came to power in April 2003, has, as part of its drive to reduce state expenditure and slash the taxes of big business and the well-to-do, demanded that the labor bureaucrats accept a less important role in the formulation of government policy.

The immediate trigger for the student strike was the government's decision to convert \$103 million in student grants into loans, a measure that severely impacts on the poorest of the province's post-secondary students. Prior to the Charest Liberals' cuts to the bursary program, the average low-income student received \$2400 per year in loans and \$2600 in bursaries. With the changes imposed by the Charest government, the average student now receives \$4700 in loans and just \$300 in bursaries. As a consequence, the average student debt at graduation is expected to rise from \$14,000 to \$21,500.

Significant as the bursary issue is, the strike is indicative of a much broader opposition to the government's agenda and indeed to the whole trajectory of society over the past quarter century, in which the rights of working people have been systematically clawed back and society has become ever more socially polarized.

The Charest government is one of the most unpopular governments in Quebec history. Less than six months after its election in 2003, polls showed 70 percent of the population was dissatisfied, and the polls have continued to record similar levels of public dissatisfaction. In late 2003, when the Charest government was on the point of ramming through a series of regressive laws, including legislation gutting restrictions on employers' power to contract out work, massive protests erupted and the union leaders had to threaten to organize a general strike in order to retain control of the movement. Predictably, they then used the passage of the laws and the Christmas holiday season to scuttle the opposition movement. Subsequently, they redoubled their efforts to revitalize the big business Parti Québécois, whose implementation of austerity measures under Bouchard and Bernard Landry badly undercut its traditional base of working-class support.

The student strike has once again revealed the weakness of the Charest government. At first the government took a hard-line against the strike, threatening students with the loss of their semester if the strike persisted for more than a few days. Later it changed course, announcing a partial restoration of the monies cut from the bursaries, something in the order of \$40 million in the coming year and rising to \$100 million by 2009. At the same time, in line with calls from the big business press, the Liberals have indicated that in the long term, they might be ready to expand the bursary program, but only if this was tied to the scrapping of the current freeze on university tuition fees and a steep rise in tuition fees.

The government's offer has been overwhelmingly rejected by the students and their associations, leaving the Liberals in an increasingly precarious position. The Charest government recognizes that if it is seen to cave into the students, it will only stimulate opposition to its entire agenda to "re-engineer" the state through social spending cuts and lower corporate and personal income taxes. At the same time, the press is urging the government to get the student strike settled, so it can get on with the business of privatization, deregulation and tax cutting.

The capitalist press was outraged when the Liberals proved to be in such disarray that, for the first time in sixty years, the Quebec government failed to table the spending estimates for the coming fiscal year by the traditional March 31 deadline. The government has apparently been badly divided over the budget. In February, Charest fired his finance minister, because he balked at making the spending cuts necessary to finance the \$1 billion tax cut the Liberals have promised this year.

The student associations are divided over their demands. The Fédération étudiante universitaire du Québec (FEUQ) and the Fédération étudiante collégiale du Québec (FECQ), which are close to the PQ and Liberals, have limited their demands to the restoration of the \$103 million cut from the bursary program, and even this only starting in the 2005-06 school year. The other student association, the Coalition de l'association pour une solidarité syndicale étudiante élargie (CASSÉE), is demanding free education at all levels and the elimination of student debt.

The students are completely justified in mobilizing against the frontal attack by the Charest government. But those who want to seriously oppose budget cuts in education must reject the limited perspective on which the strike has so far been based.

The president of the FEUQ, Pier-Andre Bouchard-Saint-Amant, defending his association's demand that the Liberals retract the measure converting \$103 million worth of bursaries into loans, asserts that it is only a matter of convincing the government to correct an "error."

But this measure was no "error." It is part of an overall plan for cutting the social expenses of the state. Editorialists are speaking of an "error" because they are angry with the government for not having foreseen that the conversion of bursaries into loans—a measure that penalizes the poorest students—could become a catalyst for widespread opposition, and more generally for not mounting a propaganda offensive in support of its right-wing program.

Does Bouchard-Saint-Amant believe that the \$150 millions in cuts that the government is reportedly planning to make to social assistance (welfare) to help finance tax cuts in the coming budget are also an "error"? And the public sector salary freeze, the promotion of public-private partnerships (PPPs) and the gutting of the restrictions on contracting out? Are these also simply "errors"?

At their March 19 assembly, the CASSÉE voted for a resolution which states that "the Charest government is attacking practically all the social and labour movements with its anti-social measures." It is calling for "a general strike at all levels; in this way, the various social and labour movements will come together to suggest and establish a large, shared platform of demands."

But the traditional labour movement, i.e., the unions, are led by a privileged bureaucracy that has time and again smothered any serious struggle of the working class—whether it be the 1999 nurses' strike or the November-December 2003 protests—and that works systematically to subordinate the working class to the big business and pro-

independence PQ.

The mobilization of the working class is impossible without a struggle against the union bureaucracy and its political perspective which accepts of the permanence and inviolability of capitalist property relations, that is the subordination of the needs of the majority to the pursuit of profit of the few.

While it is certainly true and necessary to note that the Charest government is attacking all working people, it is no less vital to recognize that the neo-liberal program it is implementing is essentially the same as that all parties, including the social-democratic NDP, and all levels of government have pursued over the past two decades.

The social-welfare policies adopted during the post-Second World war boom are simply incompatible with the ever-intensifying struggle of global corporations for markets and profits.

Protests, however militant, will not reverse the big business offensive of the past quarter-century on jobs, wages and workers rights. At the very most, such protests will cause the government to make a temporary retreat, restoring for example the funding cut from bursaries by slashing other programs.

The current strike movement is testimony to a profound opposition to the right-wing policies of the Liberals. But to the extent that students and workers don't begin to recognize the need for a new type of politics, based on the independent political mobilization of the working class and the rejection of the profit system, there is every danger that the PQ or other right-wing forces will benefit from the popular anger and alienation with the Liberals.

It is not by repatriating the taxes that go to the Canadian federal government (a favourite formula of Québécois nationalists) that it will become possible to finance free access to quality education, the provision of health care and other basic services, and the elimination of poverty.

The development of the productive forces long ago outgrew the political division of the world into nation states. The nation-state system that prevails today serves only the interests of different bourgeoisies who seek to use nationalism and their control of the state in order to seek advantage in the struggle with other bourgeoisies and as a means of attacking the working class.

Students concerned about the growth of economic insecurity and social inequality must join the fight to develop a new party of the working class committed to a socialist and internationalist program. Such a party will unite working people in Canada—French- and English-speaking and immigrant—with workers around the world in the fight for a new principle of economic organization, under which the resources of the world economy will be used to fulfill social need not enrich a tiny minority.



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