

Québec: To counter the assault on education, a new political perspective is needed

International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) at Université du Québec à Montréal
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The central question facing Québec students—many of whom are meeting at the start of a new semester to discuss how to fight the ruling class assault on education—is one of political perspective.

The partial strike in the autumn of 2007 at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM) demonstrated that large numbers of students strongly oppose the ruling elite's drive to limit access to higher education. This opposition must be imbued with an understanding of the political issues involved in defending, and expanding to all, the right to post-secondary education.

The “unfreezing” of tuition fees announced last year by the Québec Liberal government of Jean Charest is part of a larger assault on all public services and social programs. Throughout the world, capitalist elites confronted with a profound crisis of the profit system want to claw back the concessions that were historically made to the working class. On the international scene, this crisis manifests itself in a turn towards militarism in which the United States and the other capitalist powers, including Canada, attempt to seize the planet's vital natural resources, above all oil.

In Canada, this process accelerated with the 2006 election of the Conservative government, headed by Stephen Harper. The Liberal government of Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin that preceded the Harper government was itself of a very right-wing character. It slashed unemployment benefits and made massive cuts in the federal transfers allotted to the provinces for health care, post-secondary education, and welfare, while significantly lowering taxes for the wealthy and big business. Jean Chrétien also began to reshape Canada's foreign policy, making it more aggressive. His government participated in NATO's 1999 war against Yugoslavia and joined the United States in the invasion of Afghanistan.

From the beginning of its term in office, the Harper government has sought to jettison the image of “peacekeeper” that Canadian imperialism had assumed after World War II. The Conservatives have sharply increased military spending and continued and expanded Canada's role in the occupation of Afghanistan, making the Canadian Armed Forces one of the principal protagonists in NATO's colonial-style counter-

insurgency war. The professed objective of these measures is to re-establish Canada's military on the world stage within the context of a growing rivalry among the great powers over a re-division of the world. In this enterprise, Harper has had the support of the leaders of the Québec sovereignty (independence) movement. Gilles Duceppe, the leader of the Bloc Québécois, went so far as to call the occupation of Afghanistan a “noble cause.”

In Québec, the ruling class has also made a sharp turn to the right. After the 1995 referendum on Québec sovereignty, the Parti Québécois government of Lucien Bouchard, with the approval of the union bureaucracy and in the name of eliminating the provincial budget deficit, savagely cut billions of dollars in social spending, notably in education and health care. In 2003, the newly elected Liberal government of Jean Charest began its program of “re-engineering” the state, which consisted of private-public partnerships, tax cuts for the well-to-do, and further reductions in social spending.

The present rise in tuition fees is an integral part of this rightward turn. The Charest government will raise tuition \$100 per year for the next five years, for a total hike of 30 to 40 percent. Moreover, the “unfreezing” of university tuition fees opens the door to further hikes in subsequent years, placing students in an evermore financially precarious position.

Universities throughout Québec suffer from chronic underfunding and their administrations have, as a consequence, been desperately seeking other sources of revenue through various tie-ups with big business and dubious financial ventures. This search for resources was what pushed the UQAM administration into a business scheme that ultimately left it with hundreds of millions of dollars of debts. For the government, the weight of these debts should fall squarely upon the students and employees of UQAM. The newly appointed rector of UQAM, Claude Corbo, wrote in his “plan of action for UQAM” that to resolve the financial crisis the university “must proceed ... towards the necessary revisions and changes in its activities, both academic and administrative.”

In opposition to these right-wing measures, a majority of students at UQAM participated in a student strike in autumn of 2007. Striking students repeatedly faced police brutality, with UQAM's administration (and their counterparts at nearby

CEGEP du Vieux-Montréal) calling in the riot police at the first sign of student protest.

The hike in tuition fees is a measure long sought after by big business. It was one of the demands in the “Manifesto for a Clear-eyed Québec,” a document drafted by the ex-PQ premier Lucien Bouchard and other prominent federalists and sovereignists with the aim of convincing Québec’s elite to set aside the debate over Québec’s constitutional future so as to push through a battery of right-wing policies. Sensing an opportune moment for this program’s implementation, the ruling elite now seeks to strangle any opposition movement in the cradle. In the words of the editor-in-chief of *La presse*, André Pratte, himself a signatory of the manifesto: “In front of a government which... holds itself upright, students do not have the long end of the stick.”

To carry forward the opposition movement that they have launched, students must learn the lessons of the spring 2005 student strike. One of the longest in the history of the Québec, the strike was part of the strong opposition to Charest’s right-wing measures that developed among large sections of Québec’s working people.

After its election in spring, 2003, the Charest Liberal government sought to quickly impose its program for “re-engineering” the state. But workers rose up against the government’s initial measures, organising numerous demonstrations and strikes in December 2003. Faced with the prospect of losing control of the opposition movement, the unions imposed a “truce” for the holidays and strengthened their ties to the big business Parti Québécois.

With their ploy of a “holiday truce,” the unions were able to sabotage the first wave of popular struggle against the Charest government. The second wave came with the eruption of the students’ strike in early 2005. In this instance too, the union bureaucracy played a key role in neutralizing the movement. Henri Massé, the then president of the Québec Federation of Labor, the province’s largest union federation, called on students to accept a “compromise,” in other words to accept the \$103-million cut to the student loans and bursaries program that precipitated the strike.

The only strategy that could have led to the success of the strike was a wide political appeal to the entire working class for a common struggle against the socially destructive policy carried out by the Charest government and the entire ruling class. A turn of the students to the working class, the only social force capable of reorganising society on a progressive basis, would have required the unmasking of the pro-capitalist policies of the union bureaucracy and their political subordination of working people to the big business Parti Québécois. However, this route was rejected by CASSÉÉ, the student union that led the last strike. It limited the strike to a protest campaign oriented solely towards recouping the \$103 million without questioning the existing social order, and worked hand-in-glove with the unions to isolate the strike from

the public sector workers’ contract struggle.

Workers throughout the world have been engaged in bitter struggles against big business. In the United States, film and television writers have been on strike since November 5 against the oligopoly exerted by a few media companies. In Germany, after several months on the picket lines, train drivers continue a courageous strike for better working conditions. In France, president Nicolas Sarkozy faced a mass movement against his attacks on what remains of the welfare state.

The real allies of Québec students are not the union bureaucracies, the steadfast defenders of a social order that provides them with numerous privileges, but the international working class. To advance the struggle in defense of education, students must not let themselves be misled by nominally left parties like Québec Solidaire who are oriented towards the Parti Québécois and the union bureaucracy and oppose any independent movement of the working class. Rather, students must broaden their demands and extend their movement to the entire working class in a common struggle for social equality and against the subordination of society to the profit needs of big business. In opposition to all attempts to pit workers and youth in Québec against those in English Canada and elsewhere through Québec nationalism, we call for the international unity of workers against their common enemy, capitalism.

Join the International Students for Social Equality! Join the fight for socialism! Establish branches of the ISSE in your high school, CEGEP, or university!

The ISSE will be holding its next public meeting in Montreal:

Wednesday, 23 January, 7PM

UQAM

Pavillon Judith-Jasmin

Room J-1120

405 rue Ste-Catherine Est

or Berri-UQAM métro



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