ISSE intervenes in student assembly at Québec university

Our reporter
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At a general assembly held on January 17, 500 University of Québec at Montréal (UQAM) students from various humanities and social science departments (sociology, geography, history, philosophy, psychology, etc.) discussed how to oppose tuition fee hikes imposed by Jean Charest's provincial Liberal government and how best to defend the education system. The debate centered on demands put forward by the assembled students and the possibility of a student strike.

The meeting adopted a motion calling for a series of protest actions, culminating in a strike vote at the beginning of February. Students called for measures to promote free post-secondary education and opposed any hike in tuition and incidental fees. They rejected the financial plan put forward by the university administration, which aims to put the burden of paying off UQAM's massive and mounting debt squarely on the backs of students and university employees.

The discussions held at the general assembly—in the aftermath of an opposition movement that started in the fall of 2007 with partial student strikes at UQAM—showed that the student movement, its militancy notwithstanding, is lacking a clear political perspective to carry the struggle forward. Students are opposed to measures that limit equitable access to post-secondary education and that curtail government support for education, but do not see their struggles as part of a larger social movement against mounting social inequality and economic insecurity that could and should involve broad layers of the population. As a result, there is a certain pessimism among students as they contemplate their chances of countering the ruling class assault upon education.

At the beginning of the discussion period, a UQAM student affiliated with the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) took the floor to propose a new political perspective to the students.

He began his intervention by placing tuition hikes in a broader historical and political context: "These right-wing measures, like the removal of the 'freeze' on tuition fees, are not new. For thirty years, we have witnessed attacks upon the working conditions and living standards of working people. The ruling elite are attempting to claw back the concessions made to the working class in an earlier period. Also, we are witnessing a rise in social inequality, attacks upon democratic rights, and a dramatic rise in militarism raising the threat of a global conflict.

"This is the world that we live in," continued the ISSE member. "In this context it is inevitable that conflicts between working people and the ruling elite will continue to mount."

He pointed to recent social struggles in Québec, the rest of Canada, and throughout the world and sought to demonstrate their international character. He mentioned the mass demonstrations against the Iraq war in 2003, the popular movements in opposition to the previous Parti Québécois provincial government and the current Liberal government, the student strike in Québec during the winter of 2005, the student strike in France during the winter of 2006, the writers' strike in the United States, and the current train drivers' strike in Germany.

In this context of mounting class struggle, the ISSE student emphasized the urgency of adopting a correct political perspective: "Can we limit ourselves to protest politics? To pressuring a ruling elite that is fundamentally opposed even to our limited demands and has nothing to offer except militarism, further cuts, and mounting social inequality?" To illustrate his point, he mentioned the brutal police actions taken against

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students during the partial UQAM strike in the fall of 2007, when students demonstrated their opposition to the attacks upon the education system. “At the first sign of opposition, the administration of the universities and the government did not hesitate to send the riot police to suppress the students.”

The ISSE student further explained that “to advance in their struggle, students must learn the lessons of past defeats, like the student strike of 2005, and turn towards the working class on the basis of a socialist perspective.”

Such a perspective, as underlined by an ISSE statement distributed at the entrance of the meeting, demands a break with the pro-capitalist trade union bureaucracy that politically subordinates the Quebec working class to the big business Parti Québécois and divides workers in Quebec from their class brothers and sisters in English Canada and around the world.

The ISSE member concluded his intervention by calling upon “students interested in these questions to come to the next meeting of the ISSE here at UQAM, to join the International Students for Social Equality and to take up the fight for socialism.”

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