

Mass protest against Quebec government budget cuts

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More than 50,000 people, from all parts of Quebec, marched through the streets of Montreal last Saturday to protest against the new round of social spending cuts and service-fee hikes to be outlined in the budget to be tabled this Thursday by the provincial Liberal government of Jean Charest.

Health care workers, teachers, civil servants, and workers affiliated with industrial unions like the Steelworkers joined large numbers of university and CEGEP (college) students in expressing their strong opposition to the anti-social measures of the Charest government.

The march concluded at Premier Charest's Montreal office.

In their 2010 budget, the Liberals imposed a new health care tax and announced multiple hikes in the provincial sales tax, electricity rates, and university tuition fees, while continuing to reduce taxes for big business and the rich. The coming budget is to outline the Liberals' plans to limit the total increase in government spending to little more than 2 percent per year, which translates into a major cut in real spending when inflation and population growth are taken into account, and to eliminate the provincial deficit by the 2013-14 fiscal year. These measures will involve both substantial spending cuts and further service-fee increases.

The large turnout at Saturday's demonstration attests to the determination of broad sections of the population to oppose the drive of the government and the capitalist elite as a whole to destroy what remains of the welfare-

state programs established in the 1960s and 70s.

But the principal objective of the organizers of Saturday's demonstration—the trade union-dominated *Alliance sociale* (Social Alliance)—was to smother this opposition.

On the part of the unions, the demonstration was a ritualistic affair, organized as a substitute for a struggle, not to spearhead one. The union leaders pleaded to Charest “to listen,” while saying not a word about the policies of the Parti Quebecois, the big business party to which the unions have subordinated the working class for four decades and which is currently criticizing the Charest Liberals for not cutting social spending fast or deep enough.

The *Alliance sociale* accepts the Liberals' contention that eliminating the budget deficit must be a governmental and social priority, just as they join big business in promoting the need for a competitive, that is a profitable, Quebec. They only meekly ask that the deficit be eliminated more gradually, that the rich be asked to “do their part” by slightly increasing their taxes, and that the tripartite relations through which the union bureaucracy has long received perks and influence in exchange for enforcing “social peace” be maintained.

This was this message of submission delivered to the demonstrators by Quebec Federation of Labour (FTQ) President Michel Arsenault. “It's very dangerous,” declared Arsenault, “to seek to balance the budget now.” Arsenault then made a pro forma statement, “We want to maintain and improve our social benefits.” But this in no way changes the essential position of the

Alliance—a position enshrined in the public sector unions’ recent endorsement of a five-year contract that cuts the real wages of half a million workers—acceptance of the need to balance the budget and attract capitalist investment and, consequently, of a drastic reduction in social spending.

The ruling class is conscious of the fact that the social spending cuts and imposition of the new “user-pay approach” to services will provoke resistance from the working class and under conditions where the unions are increasingly discredited because of their role in cutting public services, wages and jobs.

Should the union bureaucracy prove unable to continue to suppress the class struggle, the ruling class will use repression to impose its anti-social agenda. The preparations for this are well underway, as was illustrated by the vast police presence at Saturday’s demonstration, including mounted police and surveillance helicopters. Before the protesters had even begun to march, police arrested ten young people—6 men and 4 women.

In his speech to the demonstrators assembled outside the premier’s office, the spokesman for the student group *l’Association pour une solidarité syndicale étudiante*, Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois, denounced these “arbitrary arrests.” Speaking later to a journalist, Nadeau-Dubois declared, “It’s not because you are young, wear black clothes, and have ideals like anti-capitalism that one should be arbitrarily arrested.”

Supporters of the Socialist Equality Party distributed hundreds of copies of a statement titled “Workers must launch a political struggle against the Liberals and PQ” to the demonstrators.

It read in part, “In opposing the Charest government’s budget cuts, workers in Quebec are not challenging the policies of a particular government, but the class strategy of the entire bourgeoisie. In Canada and around the world, big business is determined to make the working class pay for what is an historic crisis of capitalism by destroying what remains of the Welfare State and criminalizing working class dissent.”

The statement elaborated the only viable perspective

for defeating this anti-working class offensive, “Workers and young people in Quebec must break out of the political straitjacket in which the unions have confined them by developing new organizations of struggle independent of their control. They must fight for the development of an independent political movement of the working class, advancing a socialist program to resolve the economic crisis at the expense of big business and orientated to developing a common struggle not only with workers across Canada, but in the US and around the world.”



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