

Mass protests against university fee hikes in Quebec

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More than 25,000 CEGEP (college) and university students from across Quebec marched through the streets of Montreal last week to protest against the plans of the provincial Liberal government of Jean Charest to raise university tuition fees by 75 percent.

The demonstration was characterized by everyone from the police to the press as one of the largest student demonstrations in Quebec history. It was the high point of a day of action that saw more than 200,000 CEGEP and university students on strike or in “study sessions.”

Riot police were deployed menacingly and in large numbers along the Montreal protest route. Following the main march, police intervened aggressively, using pepper spray and tear gas, to push protesters off the grounds of McGill University. Since September, McGill has been the scene of a bitter strike involving almost two thousand technicians and other support staff workers.

The day after the November 10th day of protest, Education Minister Line Beauchamp, supported by CREPQ (Quebec’s conference of university rectors and principals), reaffirmed the government’s determination to make students pay their “fair share” of their university education—no matter that students are already contending with ever-mounting debt levels and an official youth unemployment rate of almost 15 percent.

The tuition fee increase, which is to be phased in over five years, is part of a volley of regressive measures introduced by the Liberals in their last two budgets—social spending cuts, a new “health care” contribution, electricity rate hikes, and increased user-fees—that are aimed at placing the burden of the economic crisis on working people.

Under the government’s plan to have students pay their “fair share,” tuition fees will increase by \$325 a year for five years beginning next year, raising the annual cost of a

regular university program from \$2,167 to \$3,793, an increase of \$1,625, or 75 percent. If one takes into account the \$500 per year increase in university tuition fees imposed by the Liberals between 2007, university fees will have risen by 127 percent by 2017.

Of the additional \$850 million the government says it wants invested in Quebec’s universities over the next five years, 31.2 percent is slated to come from students through tuition fee hikes.

The government, with the all but unanimous support of the corporate media, has sought to justify the tuition fee hikes, by pointing to the even more dramatic rise that has taken place in the fees charged to university students in other provinces. The average tuition of a Canadian university student is estimated to be \$5,366. This, according to the Canadian Federation of Students, compares with \$1,464 at the beginning of the 1990s.

Because of tuition fee increases and the elimination of most government grants (bursaries) for even the most impoverished students, the past two decades have seen a huge increase in student debt. Canada-wide the total outstanding student currently stands at \$15 billion.

A recent study published by the *Fédération étudiante universitaire du Québec* (FEUQ—Quebec Federation of University Students) found that more than a third of full-time university students had accumulated an average student debt of \$14,000 during their first three years of study. A quarter of them will have amassed a debt in excess of \$20,000 by the time they finish their studies.

This study also shows that the Quebec government’s loan and bursary program is totally inadequate. Fifty-two percent of students who obtain a loan from the government’s student aid program are forced to turn to other lenders (banks and credit card companies that charge annual interest rates in the

range of 20 percent) to meet expenses related to their studies.

Currently almost one-third of former Quebec university students who were lent money by the government are taking advantage of an option that allows those in “a precarious financial situation” (i.e., who have a monthly income of less than \$980) to delay repaying their student debt.

Students are also being squeezed by the longterm stagnation of wages and the ongoing global economic crisis. Most full-time university and CEGEP students rely not just on summer jobs, but also on part-time employment to support themselves. However, both types of employment have become scarce.

This summer the official jobless rate for Canadian students aged 15 to 24 was 17.2 percent, up marginally from the 16.9 recorded in the summer of 2010 and sharply from 2006-2008, when the average was less than 14 percent.

The overall jobless rate for young people is also up sharply, rising from 10.9 percent in August 2007 to 14 percent today. This underscores that even when young people have secured vocational training or a university diploma, they face difficult job prospects.

Last week’s day of action was viewed by many students as only a first step to a possible unlimited student strike during the winter term.

The International Students for Social Equality (ISSE), the student movement of the Socialist Equality Party (Canada), is fighting for the understanding that the opposition to the fee hikes must be fused with a broader mobilization of the working class in Quebec and across Canada against the drive of big business and the entire political establishment to make the working class pay for the capitalist crisis.

Such a perspective is radically opposed to that advanced by the leadership of the three province-wide student associations FEUQ, the *Fédération étudiante collégiale du Québec* (FECQ—the Quebec Federation of College Students), and *L’association pour une solidarité syndicale étudiante* (ASSÉ—Association for Student Union Solidarity). The FEUQ and FECQ have close ties to the big business Parti Québécois (PQ) and to the trade union bureaucracy.

The PQ is cynically posing as an opponent of the Liberals’ tuition fee hikes, yet it has also repeatedly attacked the Charest government for not eliminating the provincial deficit

more rapidly, through even more brutal austerity measures. Moreover, when the PQ last held office (1994-2003), it implemented unprecedented social spending cuts. It eliminated tens of thousands of jobs in the health and education sectors, then, once its ostensible “zero deficit” objective was achieved, slashed the taxes of big business and the most privileged sections of the population.

In what constitutes backhand support for the PQ, the FEUQ has made mobilizing electors to vote against the Liberals in a by-election to be held in Bonaventure on December 5 and in the next provincial election, due sometime in the next 18 to 24 months, one of its main priorities.

For decades, the unions have provided strong backing to the PQ as part of their suppression of the class struggle. In 2005, they intervened in what was the longest student strike in Quebec history to pressure the student associations to accept a slightly scaled down version of the Charest government’s plan to cut Quebec’s student aid program. The fear of the union bureaucracy was that the students’ strike might serve as a catalyst for the mobilization of more than half a million public sector workers who were then facing significant concession demands.

ASSÉ strikes a more militant pose. But it says nothing about the role of the union bureaucracy in policing the working class on behalf of big business and maintains that access to quality higher education can be defended and extended by pressuring the government and the capitalist elite.

The ISSE fights to turn students to the working class—the only social force capable of waging a successful struggle against capitalism and for social equality—so as to assist in the independent political mobilization of the working class against big business, its political representatives of the right and “left,” and the bureaucratized union apparatuses.



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