

Quebec's striking students must turn to the working class!

International Students for Social Equality
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Issued in French on February 23, this statement of the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) was distributed at a mass demonstration of striking university and CEGEP (junior college) students held in Montreal that same day. Since February 13, increasing numbers of students have launched walkouts and unlimited strikes to oppose the Quebec Liberal government's plans to increase university tuition fees by 75 percent or \$1625 over the next five years. Currently some 80,000 university and CEGEP students—almost a fifth of Quebec's entire post-secondary student population—are on strike and in the coming days tens of thousands more are to vote on whether to join the walkout.

The Charest government's drastic hike in university tuition fees is part of a whole series of measures—pursued by all levels of government across Canada—to eviscerate the public and social services upon which workers and youth depend and divert still more of society's resources to big business and the wealthy. The growing wave of student strikes opposing the tuition fee hike will be warmly welcomed by all those seeking to oppose the socially regressive programme of big business and its governments.

The student strike, however, cannot succeed unless it becomes the spearhead of a vast counter-offensive of the entire working class. For this to happen, the strike must go beyond a mere protest over a single issue. Students must consciously turn towards the working class, the only social force capable of offering a progressive alternative to the capitalist system of private property and profit that condemns the overwhelming majority of society to rising unemployment, poverty, and economic insecurity.

The Liberal government's increase in tuition fees is only one element in its agenda of radically reducing public spending and increasing the taxes and fees levied upon the general population, while simultaneously

implementing large tax cuts for corporations and the wealthy.

This austerity program is the Quebec version of a concerted drive mounted by the bourgeoisie around the world to use the global capitalist crisis as a pretext to eliminate what remains of the social gains workers won through the massive social struggles of the 20th Century.

Rescued by trillions of dollars in interest-free loans and direct cash infusions provided by various national governments in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, the huge banks and international financial institutions are demonstrating ever more nakedly their dominance of all aspects of modern society. Thus they have imposed governments of "technocrats," using intimidation and other anti-democratic means, in Greece and Italy in order to impose unprecedented austerity programs in the face of massive popular opposition.

In Canada, the Harper Conservative government, which won a majority in last May's federal election due to big business' quasi-unanimous support, is preparing its own massive assault upon public services and worker's rights. After directly intervening to break strikes at Air Canada and Canada Post and impose concessions, including cuts in pensions, the Conservatives are preparing to introduce a budget that will slash spending by as much as \$8 billion a year. And they have singled out Medicare and Old Age Security as especially important targets of their austerity program.

What is necessary is nothing less than a fundamental reorganization of society, so that the economy is organized to meet the needs of society rather than creating profits for a tiny minority. The only social force capable of implementing this kind of revolutionary change is the working class. Students must consciously reach out to workers as allies in a common battle and fight to transform the student strike against tuition fee increases into a unified struggle in defense of *all* public services, *all*

social programmes, and *all* jobs.

A turn to the working class means not only sending student delegations to workplaces, but first and foremost assisting the workers in breaking politically and organizationally from the trade union bureaucracy, which for decades has isolated and suppressed the struggles of the working class.

This perspective is diametrically opposed to that advanced by FEUQ (the Québec Federation of University Students) and FECQ (Québec Federation of CEGEP Students). They are part of the “Social Alliance” – an organization dominated by the union leaders of the FTQ, the CSN, and the CSQ. The Social Alliance wholly accepts the austerity program of the Charest Liberal government, proposing only to “...push the return to a balanced budget further into the future.”

Students should draw lessons from the role that the union bureaucracy played during the 2005 student strike. After feigning support for the strike, the union leaders prevailed on the students to make a “compromise” with the Charest government in order to “keep the social peace.” They were determined at all costs to prevent the students’ struggle from becoming the catalyst for a mobilization of the half million Quebec public sector workers who were then facing huge concession demands from the provincial government—concessions the government later imposed by decree.

Students also should beware the efforts of FEUQ and FECQ to channel the student strike behind the Parti Québécois (PQ). The PQ, which in a sudden about-face has now promised not to raise tuition fees for an entire term should it win the coming provincial election, is just as loyal an instrument of big business as the Charest Liberals and the rightist Coalition Avenir Québec (Coalition for Québec’s Future).

The Charest government has only continued and widened the assault on the working class initiated by the 1994-2003 PQ government. In the name of eliminating the budget deficit, the PQ imposed massive cuts in health care and education, then made huge tax cuts skewed in favor of big business and the rich. Since falling from power, the PQ has lurched still further right, criticizing Charest for not reducing the budget deficit fast enough.

Although CLASSE [“The Broader Coalition of the Association for Student-Union Solidarity”] has adopted a more radical stance, initiating the current strike movement, its political perspective does not differ fundamentally from that of FEUQ and FECQ. It conceives of the student strike, which it characterizes as a

measure of last resort, as a more aggressive form of protest aimed at pressuring the Charest government into negotiations. For all its angry rhetoric, CLASSE is opposed to linking the student strike with a movement of the working class against the attacks of big business and its political representatives in Quebec City and Ottawa.

CLASSE’s constant refrain is that if students make a big enough noise, the government will have to negotiate. But the current socioeconomic and political environment differs significantly from that of 2005, when Quebec students last mounted a province-wide strike. Over the past seven years and especially under the impact of the 2008 crisis, the ruling class has veered decisively to the right and increasingly sought to criminalize resistance to its class war agenda. In its current conflict with post-secondary students, the Charest government has adopted a hard line—inciting the police to harass and arrest angry students and instructing universities and CEGEPs to remain open and to force teachers and professors to continue to report to their classes.

Students are confronted with a political struggle that goes far beyond the single issue of tuition fees. The question has been clearly posed: Who should control the resources of society and how should socioeconomic life be organized?

Big business, its loyal representatives in the political establishment, and its mouthpieces in the corporate media answer that all must be subordinated to big business’ profits. The working class needs to propose their own alternative: the struggle for a workers’ government dedicated to the establishment of social equality, including free quality education for all at all levels. Students must fight for this program by consciously seeking to join their struggle with those of the workers and by fighting for the independent political mobilization of the working class.

We call upon students, in Quebec and throughout Canada, to join the fight for Socialism! Join the International Students for Social Equality and read the *World Socialist Web Site*.



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