

Support for Quebec student strike swells

Eric Marquis
1 March 2012

Seventy thousand Quebec university and CEGEP (pre-university and technical college) students—almost one-fifth of all post-secondary students in the province—have joined a strike against the provincial Liberal government’s plans to dramatically increase university tuition fees. And tens of thousands more could soon join the strike. Nine thousand students have authorized their associations to initiate strike action and 70,000 additional university and CEGEP students are holding strike votes this week and next.

Quebec’s Liberal government is committed to raising tuition fees by 75 percent, or \$1,625 over the next five years. The tuition fee hikes are part of a sweeping austerity program involving steep social spending cuts, the imposition of a new health care tax, electricity rate increases, a hike in the regressive sales tax, and new or increased user fees for other government services.

The corporate media is uniformly against the strike, but polls show the students enjoy the support of the majority of Quebecers.

In a cynical pre-election maneuver, the official opposition Parti Québécois (PQ), which has repeatedly denounced the Charest government for not eliminating the deficit fast enough, now claims that if elected it will freeze tuition fees at the current \$2,168 per annum through its first term.

The same newspaper editorialists who have pressed for tax cuts for big business and the wealthy are demagogically denouncing “privileged” university students for trying to make tax-payers pay for their education. The reality is that increases in tuition fees, various administrative fees, the price of text books, and the general cost-of-living are forcing ever-increasing numbers of students to incur large debts or abandon their studies. Due to two decades of cuts by Liberal and PQ governments alike, three-quarters of students are not eligible for student aid.

The student strike was initiated February 13 by the smallest of the province’s three student associations, the *Coalition large de l’association pour une solidarité syndicale étudiante* (CLASSE—The Broader Coalition of the Association for Student-Union Solidarity).

As its name would suggest, CLASSE portrays itself as more militant than FEUQ (the Québec Federation of University Students) and FECQ (Quebec Federation of College Students), both of which have close ties to the trade union bureaucracy and to the PQ. But fundamentally the perspective of all three is the same: to pressure the big business Liberal government into reconsidering

its five-year tuition fee hike scheme through a single-issue protest that separates the struggle against the tuition fee hikes from a broader struggle to mobilize the working class against the austerity measures being imposed by the Charest Liberal and federal Conservative governments.

Students’ anger and determination, as well as the urgent need for the opposition to the fee hikes to be animated by a socialist perspective, were exemplified by a demonstration of 15,000 students in Montreal on Thursday, Feb. 23.

At the end of the downtown demonstration, a group of approximately 1,000 students headed to the Jacques-Cartier Bridge, which connects the Island of Montreal with the south shore. The bridge had to be closed for about an hour, which is when clashes between the Montreal riot police and students began. The police resorted to batons and pepper spray to disperse the demonstrators—a brutal tactic that has become commonplace.

The previous week, when students had blocked access to the Stock Exchange Tower, the symbol of finance in Montreal, they were also dispersed by the batons and cayenne pepper of the police department’s riot squad.

And on the evening of Feb. 16, police intervened violently at Cégep du Vieux-Montréal after a small group of students had camped at the student association offices because of fears the college’s administration would seek to bar them access during the strike. Thirty-seven students, including eight minors, were arrested. These young people have been charged with public mischief, assault, armed assault against police, and even of conspiracy. Students say they were provoked and manhandled by police and that they acted in self-defence.

This criminalization of the students’ struggle is clearly desired by the Liberal government. In a letter sent recently to college administrators, the provincial Ministry of Education pointed out that students “are not subject to the Labour Code” and that “institutions can continue to provide training despite the mandate to strike.” By effectively instructing CEGEPs and universities to continue offering classes during the strike, the government is seeking to provoke picket line confrontations so as to smear the striking students as violent and divide students and teachers.

Jean Trudelle, the president of FNEEQ, the union representing most CEGEP teachers, has denounced the Education Ministry letter, saying it was like “putting oil on the fire.”

Although the unions profess support for the students, they are adamantly opposed to any mobilization of the working class against the Charest government.

These nationalist and pro-capitalist organizations are entirely part of the establishment. They fully accept the existing legal framework, the necessity for austerity measures and deficit reduction, and for fiscal (tax and social spending) policies that ensure the “competitiveness”—that is profitability—of the Quebec economy.

For decades, the unions have isolated and sabotaged militant workers’ struggles, while politically subordinating the working class to the big business PQ.

During the 2005 student strike, the trade union bureaucracy lined up with the government, pressing students to make concessions in the interests of preserving “social peace.” The bureaucracy’s worst fear was that the rebellious spirit among the students would spark a movement of the working class, particularly since public sector collective agreements had expired and half a million teachers, nurses, hospital workers, and civil servants were facing draconian concessions demands from the Liberal government.

In opposition to the single-issue protest perspective of the student associations—a perspective that can only lead to the strikers’ isolation and defeat—members of the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) intervened at the Feb. 23 demonstration in Montreal and distributed a statement entitled “Quebec’s striking students must turn to the working class.”

The statement explained: “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.”

In conclusion, the statement declared: “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 socio-economic 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.”

Many students were interested in the ISSE’s perspective and several agreed to be interviewed by the *World Socialist Web Site* about the strike and the issues it has raised.

Jason, a CEGEP science student, said that if the fee increase takes place, “I’ll have to wait one or two years, working and

saving to pay for my classes.” He added, “I had to get a second job and I still have problems making ends meet. And there are still books that I cannot yet afford. With how bad it is now, imagine how much worse it will get with tuition rising.”

According to Pascale, a student in social work, “the student movement is important, but I think it is also important that people in general are mobilized, whether unemployed, or in trade unions, to counter this problem that is really growing. We see a real gap growing between the popular and the bourgeois classes.

“Premier Charest does not intend to give up, so I think that it will be necessary to continue the protests, sit-ins, and possibly other more provocative actions.”

On the issue of the existing political parties, Pascale said: “I think that the political parties all say the same things but in different words. We need a really big change, but this is just not happening at the moment.

“To have a much more powerful movement, we should not just be talking about the increase in tuition fees, but also about privatization and other social inequalities.”

Samuel, an anthropology student, said, “I am already, like most Canadians, greatly indebted. I returned to university after 20 years, and so in addition to my debts I will have my student loans to repay. So if there is the tuition increase, it becomes a vicious circle that I’ll never get out of.”

Samuel linked the assault on access to higher education in Quebec to the crisis of international capitalism and the rise of the extreme right in Europe. “I am firmly convinced that we’ve returned to the 1930s. You can see in Europe the rise of a movement that could be called euro-fascism. It’s a reminder that Nazism came from the elites and was not a mass movement. And today, euro-fascism is again being put in place by the elites, and not by the people.

“Globally, we see many Western countries where the political leaders are puppets. They have given their powers over to financial interests. You can see this occurring in Greece, in Italy. Former Goldman Sachs personnel have taken power without being elected. This is definitely alarming.”



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact