

Quebec: Almost 200,000 students striking against university tuition fee hikes

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The strike movement at Quebec's CEGEPS (colleges) and universities continues to grow. Initiated by some 25,000 students in mid-February, the movement has swelled to involve close to 200,000 students at French- and English-language post-secondary institutions across Quebec. Many thousands more are expected to join the strike next week in the run-up to Thursday's "national" (Quebec-wide) student demonstration in Montreal.

The students are demanding that the provincial Liberal government of Jean Charest withdraw its plan to raise university tuition fees by 75 percent over the next five years. There is a widespread popular support for this demand, as part of a more general, albeit to this point inchoate, opposition to the Charest and federal Conservative governments' "austerity" agendas of social spending cuts, privatization, and new and increased user fees and regressive taxes.

The ruling class stands four-square behind the Liberal government and the hard line it has taken against the student strike.

Education Minister Line Beauchamp, Finance Minister Raymond Bachand, and Premier Charest have been adamant that they will not rescind or amend the fee-hikes. The corporate media has mounted a concerted campaign to denigrate the students' concerns about equal access to higher education and to portray their demands as "selfish." On Tuesday, *La presse*, Quebec's most influential daily, published an editorial titled "Nothing to negotiate." Written by *La presse's* editor-in-chief, André Pratte, the editorial declared, "The Charest government has no reason to retreat. The [tuition] increase is necessary and reasonable. It will not impede access to university studies."

François Legault, the head of Quebec's third-party, the right-wing Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ-

Coalition for the future of Quebec), has voiced similar sentiments. Reaffirming the CAQ's support for the tuition fee increases, Legault declared earlier this month, "One mustn't begin to retreat on essentials every time pressure groups demonstrate."

As the strike grew last month, the government issued a letter to university and CEGEP administrators, encouraging them to try to break the strike by ordering professors and instructors to continue to hold classes. Because of the strong support for the strike and the sympathy of many teachers, this threat has, thus far, proven a dead letter.

But the police, clearly acting on the orders of their political masters, have been much in evidence. Riot police—wielding truncheons, pepper spray, and shields—have repeatedly intervened at student protests, frequently arresting those who deign to object to their provocative actions.

Police have charged more than three-dozen students at Cégep du Vieux-Montréal with public mischief, assault, and even conspiracy after the police intervened to expel them from the student union office. Police staged other arrests this week after they caught a strike-supporter drinking a beer on the steps of a student union office in downtown Montreal. Those arrested say they believe that the police had had the office under surveillance for hours.

The brutal actions of Montreal's riot police have already had a devastating impact on the life of at least one young person. On March 7, 22 year-old Cégep St. Jerome student Francis Grenier was hit in the face by a police sound grenade—a device designed to scatter crowds by emitting a loud noise—when police attacked a student demonstration and occupation at a building that is owned by a Quebec government agency and houses an inter-university administration council (CREPUQ),

which has strongly supported the tuition hikes. Grenier has been released from hospital, but he remains in danger of losing the sight in one of his eyes.

Premier Charest was quick to defend the riot police's attack: "Invade a building, make people scared ... Obviously there are consequences."

So systematic has been the police repression of the student movement that it has been criticized by a *La presse* commentator till-now very supportive of the police. Addressing the police, Patrick Lagacé wrote: "These [student] strikers are less violent than those who rioted in Montreal-North and when the Montreal *Canadiens* won victories, yet you hit them and pepper spray them with an aplomb I never saw in 2010, 2009 and 2008."

The scale and scope of the police repression underscores that the ruling elite has no intention of retreating on the tuition fee hikes, just as it has no intention of retreating on its general assault on public and social services and worker rights.

The International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) and the Socialist Equality Party are urging the students to turn to the working class and to fight for its independent political mobilization against the provincial Liberal and federal Conservative governments. "The student strike," declares an ISSE statement, "... 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." (See: Quebec's striking students must turn to the working class!)

Such a perspective is diametrically opposed to that being advanced by the three student federations: FEUQ (the Québec Federation of University Students), FECQ (the Quebec Federation of College Students) and the *Coalition large de l'association pour une solidarité syndicale étudiante* (CLASSE—The Broader Coalition of the Association for Student-Union Solidarity).

FEUQ and FECQ were established with the political and financial assistance of the trade union bureaucracy, after the unions intervened in the last student strike in

2005 to urge students to make "concessions" to the Liberal government so as to "preserve social peace." Like the unions, they are politically close to the big business Part Québécois (PQ), which when last in power made massive cuts to public services, including eliminating more than one thousand full-time university teaching jobs. The PQ has repeatedly attacked the Charest government for not eliminating the deficit quickly enough, but as part of a pre-election feint to the left, it is now calling for a temporary freeze on university tuition fees.

CLASSE, which initiated the current strike movement, is critical of the other two federations for their ties to the PQ, but its perspective is fundamentally no different. In the face of the evident intransigence of the government, all it has to propose is that students mount more noisy and disruptive protests aimed at pressuring the government to enter into negotiations with the student associations. It is opposed to any attempt to broaden the movement into a mobilization of the working class against the austerity programs being implemented by of governments at all levels in Quebec and across Canada and it identifies the working-class with, and supports its subordination to, the pro-capitalist trade union bureaucracy.



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