Quebec to implement university fee hikes in face of mass protests

Keith Jones
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Quebec's Liberal government has reaffirmed and expanded its austerity program of social spending cuts, regressive tax and user-fee hikes, university tuition fee increases, and electricity rate rises.

Tabled Tuesday, the Liberal budget for the 2012-13 fiscal year increases overall spending by just 2 percent. Because of inflation, population growth, and a sharp increase in interest payments on the provincial debt, this amounts to a substantial spending cut in real terms. The budget also commits the government to limiting annual spending growth to no more than 2 percent through 2015-16.

Jean Charest's Liberal government has further pledged that all of the $5 billion in budgetary surpluses it expects to generate as a result of the spending cap over the next four years will be used to pay down the provincial debt.

Because of a public outcry and its dubious legality under the *Canada Health Act*, the Liberal government was forced two years ago to drop a plan to impose user fees for hospital and doctor visits. But beginning this year, it will impose a new $200 per adult annual health care tax and it has set up a task force to consider a British-style funding model for hospitals that, in the name of "efficiency", will promote the marketization and privatization of health care.

Health care privatization has already gone further in Quebec than elsewhere in Canada, due to chronic under-funding of the public health care system (Medicare) by Liberal and Part Quebecoise governments alike and legislation, adopted in 2006, that allows many operations and procedures to be performed by the private sector.

The budget also announced that Quebec will imitate the federal Conservative government in rejecting calls for an increase in state (*Régie des rentes du Québec*) pension-plan coverage and benefits. Like Ottawa, Quebec will instead sponsor a Voluntary Retirement Savings Plan—an optional, private-sector mutual fund scheme open to the two million Quebec workers who have no employer-pension plan. Such schemes place workers' retirement at the mercy of the gyrations of the stock market, while providing lucrative profits to the private financial companies charged with administering them.

In presenting the budget, Finance Minister Raymond Bachand was especially anxious to rule out any repeal or alteration to the government's plan to raise university tuition fees by 75 percent or $1,625 over the next five years.

"Some students are opposed to it [the tuition hike] and it's their right, but we've taken our decision and it's irrevocable," declared Bachand.

Reprising the hardline stance the government has taken since walkouts against the tuition fee increases began last month, Bachand said that there is no point in meeting with student representatives: "It's hard to sit down with someone who says: 'I want a freeze and nothing else'."

Close to 250,000 university and CEGEP (pre-university and technical college) students—well more than half of all Quebec's post secondary students— are currently boycotting classes to demand that the government rescind the tuition fee hikes. And thousands of others, along with students from many high schools, will join the walkout today, when a "national" (Quebec-wide) demonstration is to be held in Montreal

The strike movement has been uniformly condemned by the corporate media as "utopian" and "selfish." What has particularly enraged the newspaper editorialists and op-ed commentators is the students' call for education to be recognized as a social right and their implicit rejection of the big business austerity agenda being implemented by all levels of government and by all parties of the establishment, including the social-democratic NDP. Like its capitalist rivals in the US, Europe and Asia, Canada's ruling elite has responded to the global financial meltdown of 2008 by seeking to destroy what remains of

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the social gains won by the working class in the tumultuous social struggles of the last century. Next week, the federal Conservative and Ontario Liberal governments are to bring down budgets that will cut billions per annum from social spending and make "structural changes" to public and social services, including, in all likelihood, raising the age of eligibility for Old Age Security.

Parti Quebecois (PQ) finance critic Sylvain Simard, joined François Legault, the head of the conservative Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ), in denouncing the Liberal budget for adding to the provincial debt. "It shows a real lack of control of public spending," said Simard.

Such complaints have been commonplace for years from the PQ, which when it last held power instituted massive social spending cuts while slashing the taxes levied on big business and the rich. But in recent weeks, the PQ, in anticipation of a provincial election this spring or fall, has made a feint left. This has included calling for a temporary freeze on university tuition fee increases.

Simard's attack on the Liberals for not implementing sufficiently savage spending cuts underscores the utterly bogus and hypocritical character of the PQ's claims to represent a progressive alternative to the Charest government—yet these claims have been promoted by the trade unions and the ostensibly new "left" party, Quebec Solidaire.

Quebec's three major student associations—FEUQ (the Québec Federation of University Students), FECQ (the Québec Federation of CEGEP Students) and CLASSE ["The Broader Coalition of the Association for Student-Union Solidarity"]—have long presented today's demonstration as the climax of the protest movement against the tuition fee hikes.

The leadership of FUEQ and FECQ, which is closely aligned with the PQ and the trade union bureaucracy, is clearly preparing to close down the protest movement. In the face of the Liberal government's refusal to back down on its plans to hike tuition fees, FUEQ and FECQ are arguing students should target the Liberals at the next provincial election. This would amount to a de facto campaign for a PQ government.

CLASSE, which initiated the strike movement, has criticized the rival student associations for their ties to the PQ. But its perspective is fundamentally the same. It has mounted a single-issue protest campaign that separates the struggle against the tuition fee hikes from a broader struggle to mobilize the working class against the assault on public services being mounted by big business and its political representatives in Quebec and across Canada.

Opposed to any turn to the working class and accepting the essential framework of establishment politics, CLASSE has welcomed the union officialdom's ritualistic statements of support for the striking students. In fact such statements are utterly two-faced—motivated, on the one hand, by the union bureaucrats' recognition that the students' protest is broadly supported and, on the other, by their fear that the student strike could serve as a catalyst for working-class struggle.

In 2005, when Quebec was last convulsed be a major student strike, the unions pressured the student associations to "compromise" with the Liberal government so as to preserve "social peace." Their fear was that the students' militant protest could galvanize the opposition of half a million public sector workers to the Liberal government's demands for contract concessions. Months after the unions helped Charest bring an end to the student protests, the government imposed a seven year-long wage-cutting contract by decree and the public sector unions quietly acquiesced.

Coming in the wake of the Occupy movement, the Quebec student strike is a sign of a growing radicalization among young people and presages the entry of the working class into mass struggles.

Supporters of the Socialist Equality Party (Canada) and the International Students for Social Equality will intervene in today's protest to fight for students to turn to the working class, so as to assist it in breaking politically and organizationally from the pro-capitalist unions and in launching an industrial and political offensive in defence of all public and social services, worker-rights, and jobs.

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