

Quebec student strike:

A strategy to mobilize the working class is needed

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The following comment was first published in French on March 22 in a slightly different form as part of a WSW/ISSE special bulletin on the Quebec student strike. The bulletin was distributed at that day's protest march in Montreal. (See: Quebec: Mammoth demonstration in support of strike against university fee hikes.) More than 200,000 Quebec university and CEGEP (pre-university and technical college) students are currently boycotting their classes to oppose the provincial Liberal government's plan to raise university tuition fees by 75 percent over five years, starting this September.

The student strike against the Quebec Liberal government's drastic increase in university tuition fees is at a crossroads. Despite the massive participation by CEGEP and university students across the province, despite the strong support of high school students, parents, teachers, and of many other sections of working people, the students' struggle cannot go forward without a fundamental change of strategy.

The students, some of whom have been striking for weeks, have displayed immense enthusiasm and imagination in expressing their loud and clear opposition to measures that will close the doors of post-secondary education to thousands of young adults whose financial situation is precarious and force many others deeper into debt.

The students' determined stand has not only generated huge popular sympathy, but also the hostility of the ruling class that is using police brutality and a campaign of vilification in the corporate media to try to bully the strikers into silence and submission. With full support of the big-business media, Premier Jean Charest has arrogantly refused to meet with student representatives, declaring that there is nothing to negotiate.

For the Charest Government, along with the rest of the ruling elite, the issue is not just one of increasing tuition fees. The increases are part of an assault on public services, social programs and workers' rights being implemented by all levels of government and all the establishment parties across Canada and internationally, as the political representatives of big business seek to make workers and young people pay for the

world capitalist crisis. Education, health care, jobs—everything must be sacrificed to feed the insatiable profit demands of the financial markets.

In opposition to the destructive principle of private profit, the students in resisting new barriers to access to education and calling for free post-secondary education are raising anew the banner of social equality that inspired previous generations of working people. The only social force that remains deeply attached to social equality and has the social power to reorganize socioeconomic life to achieve it is the working class.

It is towards this force that students must turn. Expecting the Charest government to “see reason” is useless. Like the Parti Quebecois (PQ) that preceded it and the federal Conservative government, the Charest Liberal government is entirely dedicated to the defense of the interests of big business. And for big business, the students' struggle is an intolerable challenge to their drive to destroy all the social gains made by the working class in the great social struggles of the last century, from public health care to pensions.

Instead of appealing to Charest and Education Minister Lise Beauchamp, student delegations should go to workplaces—for example, the Aveos shops in Montreal where 1800 aircraft workers were summarily fired March 19, and to Dorval airport where Air Canada workers have been stripped of their collective bargaining rights by the Harper government—and make the struggle against tuition hikes the catalyst for a working-class offensive against the dismantling of public services, all layoffs and concessions, and in defence of workers' rights.

This perspective is rejected by the leaders of CLASSE (“The Broader Coalition of the Association for Student-Union Solidarity”), the student association that triggered the strike movement. It is waging the strike as a single-issue protest and opposes any and all efforts to turn students to the working class. CLASSE spokesman Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois argued Saturday (March 17), in an interview with the newspaper *La Presse*, that simply maintaining the boycott of classes and loudly proclaiming students' anger with the government will guarantee a victory. “If we can extend the strike past March

22,” he said, “there is a good chance this government will be forced to retreat.”

During the entire interview—and this is typical of pronouncements from CLASSE’s leaders—Nadeau-Dubois did not make a single reference to workers, nor of the assault they face on their jobs, working conditions and rights. Nor was there any word on the broader austerity measures of the Charest government, of which the tuition fee hikes are a part, let alone the brutal budget cuts being implemented by governments around the world.

And when the *La Presse* reporter tried to discredit the strike by noting the “excesses in recent student protests”, Nadeau-Dubois failed to use this as an opportunity to firmly condemn the many acts of provocation and arbitrary arrests by police against students exercising their democratic right to demonstrate.

Despite its acronym and militant rhetoric, CLASSE shares the viewpoint of the other province-wide student associations (FEUQ and FECQ) that are closely tied to the establishment (the Parti Québécois and the trade union bureaucracy): students live in a world where the class struggle does not apply and where major social issues—such as access to education—can be resolved without ever putting into question the existing social order. Instead, all that can be done is to pressure the representatives of the ruling elite and hope that they will eventually see reason.

This perspective is leading the student strike into a dead end. Ignoring the intensifying class struggle around the world, including the increasingly naked ruling-class drive to criminalize popular resistance, the leaders of CLASSE have insisted that because some Quebec governments in the past made concessions in the face of student protests the Liberal government will have no choice but to drop its tuition hike plan. But in a March 19 interview with the newspaper *Le Devoir*, Nadeau-Dubois had to concede, “Unless the Liberal government surprises us, it will not back down.”

CLASSE’s response however has been more of the same. The “economic disturbance” campaign it is mounting is aimed at disrupting commuters and commercial activity, not at broadening the movement and mobilizing the immense social power of the working class. Like FEUQ and FECQ it aims to get the government to agree to negotiations.

The *Devoir* interview contains another significant passage. Speaking of the strike votes taken last November, Nadeau-Dubois said: “We were the first to doubt... Were people ready to make sacrifices?” He then expressed surprise at the enthusiastic response by students and of wide layers of the population. “Honestly, I was completely caught off-guard by the force of it.”

CLASSE’s orientation to the existing bourgeois political framework also finds expression in its acceptance of the Quebec provincial framework in which the university fee hike issue is immediately posed. It has made no appeal whatsoever

to students and workers outside Quebec for support. Yet the Quebec elite points to the higher tuitions charged in other provinces to try to justify its fee hikes. More fundamentally, the division of the working class has always been central to the maintenance of the political and economic domination of big business.

CLASSE’S protest politics reflect those of certain middle-class elements uncomfortable with certain ruling-class measures, especially those affecting their lifestyles, yet who are not fundamentally opposed to the profit system.

These elements cannot play an independent political role, much less mount a challenge to the bankrupt capitalist order. They are both skeptical of the potential of the working class to reorganize society and fearful of it.

So determined is CLASSE to promote a single-issue protest as the only conceivable form of opposition to the tuition hikes it has reversed its own position on the 2005 strike, proclaiming it a victory which shows that the government can be pressured into changing course. Previously it held the outcome of the strike a betrayal, charging FECQ and FEUQ of accepting cuts to the loans and bursary program that left students in poverty.

But a key point in CLASSE’s evaluation of the events of 2005 has not changed. The leaders of CLASSE remain silent on the key lesson of the 2005 student strike: the role of the trade unions in coming to the rescue of the Charest government and in suppressing the class struggle. When the student movement threatened to galvanize opposition among a half million public sector workers, who were facing major concession demands from the Charest government, the leaders of Quebec’s principal unions intervened, as they explained at the time to uphold “social peace” and prevailed on FEUQ and FECQ to negotiate a “compromise” with the government.

Students must break from the limited protest politics being advocated by CLASSE and turn to workers—the only social force capable of offering a viable alternative to the bankrupt capitalist system through the struggle for social equality and socialism.

Joining with the workers implies a common fight against the pro-capitalist trade union bureaucracy that through its alliance with the big-business Parti Québécois politically subordinates workers to the ruling elite and works to quarantine their struggles from those of workers in the rest of Canada and internationally.



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