

Quebec government escalates campaign to break student strike

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Quebec's elite has stepped up its campaign to break the two-month old province-wide student strike, which it views as an intolerable challenge to its drive to dismantle public services and extinguish any social rights.

At the height of the strike in late March, 250,000 university and CEGEP (pre-university and technical college) students were boycotting classes to oppose the Quebec Liberal government's plan to raise university tuition fees by 75 percent over the next five years. 180,000 students remain on strike, including those at all but one of the nine public French-language CEGEPs in Montreal. At many institutions students have voted to continue the strike until the government rescinds its planned fee hikes and freezes university tuition fees.

Education Minister Line Beauchamp has ordered the province's postsecondary institutions "to do everything in their power" to resume classes, noting that they have a legal obligation to provide instruction. Speaking at a press conference Wednesday, Beauchamp said, "It is my responsibility to remind the directors of universities and CEGEPs that all measures should be taken so that courses can be given."

On Thursday, a mass picket involving more than five hundred striking students successfully thwarted the plan of the Collège de Valleyfield, southwest of Montreal, to resume classes. A small number of students opposed to the strike had gathered outside the Collège Thursday morning in response to the administration's appeal for students to return to classes in defiance of the expressed will of the majority. But given the size of the pro-strike crowd, the police dared not intervene. The Collège administration has nonetheless vowed that it will persist in its efforts to break the strike, announcing that it will continue to try to resume classes each day until it is successful.

On Friday, the Université de Montréal (UdeM) asked Quebec's Superior Court to issue an injunction banning

all student protests from its extensive campus. This would be in addition to a court injunction issued earlier in the week that makes students liable to harsh penalties if they try to bar access to UdeM pavilions or classes or otherwise disrupt university activities.

Last week Montreal's other major French-language university, the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM), obtained a court injunction that makes anyone who bars access to a UQAM pavilion or class liable to a \$50,000 fine and a one-year prison term.

The courts have also issued injunctions to force the resumption of courses in the Anthropology Department of Quebec City's Laval University and at the Collège d'Alma. The ruling by Quebec Superior Court Judge Jean Lemelin in the Alma case was particularly chilling as the judge sought to rewrite the law to suggest that a student boycott of classes is illegal, while at the same time drawing attention to how limited the right of workers to strike is under Quebec and Canadian law. Declared Judge Lemelin, "The legality of the strike appears dubious considering Quebec's labour law regime, which only gives the right to strike to certain people and under very strict conditions."

The various injunctions—and more are undoubtedly in the works—are being enforced by the police, who have been aggressively deployed against the students, especially in Montreal, for most of the past two months. Repeatedly the police have set upon protesting students with pepper spray and batons, used alleged random acts of vandalism to declare demonstrations illegal assemblies, and staged large-scale arbitrary arrests.

While the courts and police are seeking to criminalize the student strike, the government and the university and CEGEP administrations are threatening to cancel the semester if classes do not resume next week.

Quebec's and Canada's big business elite are strongly

supporting the authorities' drive to break the strike, just as they have applauded the tuition fee hikes and the Charest Liberal government's refusal to even meet with representatives of the striking students to discuss their demands.

The government "shouldn't give in or make any compromise" with the students, declared the president and CEO of the Montreal Chamber of Commerce, Michel Leblanc, in a recent interview with the business weekly *Les Affaires*. "It's a problem we frequently have in Quebec: elected officials retreat too often when pressure groups protest strongly."

In an editorial published yesterday, André Pratte, the editor-in-chief of *La presse*, Quebec's most influential daily, dismissed concerns about the aggressive and repressive measures being used to break the strike. "Student leaders and journalists speak of 'a forced return to classes,'" wrote Pratte, "Forced? Are police pushing students into classrooms?"

A prominent advocate of social spending cuts, marketization, and privatization, Pratte went on to emphasize the need for a decisive defeat of the students' strike so as to pave the way for further big business "reforms." "If the Charest government," declared Pratte, "were to follow the advice of the left and wets who, while in favor of the tuition fee hikes, tremble at the sight of a 'crisis,' there would no longer be the means to carry out any reform whatsoever in Quebec."

The *Globe and Mail*, Canada's supposed newspaper of record and traditional voice of the Bay Street financial establishment, has also published an editorial and commentary lacerating the students.

The capitalist elite recognizes that the student strike is an implicit challenge to the austerity measures being implemented by all levels of government across Canada and all the official parties. Moreover, they view it as an intolerable affront that students should be demanding that quality education be recognized as a social right at the very point when, in response to the global economic crisis, they have proclaimed that all the rights won by the working class through great social struggles in the last century—from public health care to decent pensions—should be gutted.

The student strike is at a crossroads. If it remains a single-issue protest aimed at pressuring the establishment, it will be defeated, notwithstanding students' tenacity and the widespread popular support they have won.

Students must make their implicit challenge to the class strategy of big business and all its political representatives

explicit by turning to working class and fighting for a working class-led counter-offensive against the entire program of social reaction being advanced by the ruling elite. A turn to the working class requires above all a struggle to break the political influence of the trade union bureaucracy, which for decades has smothered worker resistance, quarantined the struggles of Quebec workers from those of workers in the rest of Canada and internationally, and sought to tie the working class to the big business Parti Québécois (PQ).

This socialist perspective is rejected by the student unions leading the strike, including the one that initiated the strike movement, CLASSE ("The Broader Coalition of the Association for Student-Union Solidarity"). While the leaders of CLASSE criticize FECQ (the Federation of Quebec College Students) and FEUQ (the Federation of Quebec University Students) for their close ties to the PQ, its orientation is fundamentally the same—pressuring the Charest Liberal government to negotiate.

Orientated to the political establishment and accepting the permanence of the existing social order, the leaders of CLASSE vehemently oppose a turn to the working class and deliberately separate students' opposition to the tuition fee hikes from a broader challenge to the austerity programs of the Quebec Liberal and federal Conservative governments. To the extent that they speak of broadening the students' struggle at all, it is to appeal to and join with various and sundry middle-class protest groups and the trade unions.

The International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) is holding an emergency meeting in Montreal this Sunday to discuss what is at stake in the Quebec student strike and the role it can play as a catalyst for the development of an independent political movement of the working class in Quebec and across Canada. The meeting is being held Sunday, April 15, at 1:30 PM at the Centre St.-Pierre, 1212 Panet, Room 202.



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