

In the face of state repression, government intransigence:

Quebec student strike at a crossroads

The International Students for Social Equality
18 April 2012

This is an edited version of the statement supporters of the International Students for Social Equality distributed at a demonstration of more than 25,000 people in Montreal last Saturday, held in support of the province-wide strike of Quebec university and CEGEP (pre-university and technical college) students. The students are opposing the Quebec Liberal government's plan to raise university tuitions by 75 percent over the next five.

For the past two months Quebec students have boldly opposed the drastic increase in university tuition fees being imposed by the provincial Liberal Government of Jean Charest. In waging this struggle, the longest student strike in Quebec history, students have stood for the principle that education is a social right, not a privilege.

This principle constitutes, objectively, a challenge to the class strategy of the ruling elite, which is determined to make workers and young people pay for the world capitalist crisis through job- and wage cuts, speed-ups, and the dismantling of public services.

It is a challenge that the ruling class is not prepared to tolerate. Hence the ever-widening use of the repressive powers of the state to break the student strike. Montreal's riot police have repeatedly been deployed to disperse protesting students with baton-charges, tear gas and sound grenades and to mount arbitrary arrests. The courts have issued injunctions restricting, and in some cases forbidding, student picket lines, and repeatedly ruled that universities and CEGEPs must proceed with regular classes and student evaluations to accommodate "the rights" of any student opposed to the protest. The government, for its part, has steadfastly refused to discuss the students' demands, threatened to punish students by canceling the semester if they do not end their boycott of classes forthwith, and instructed universities and CEGEPs to discipline teachers who refuse to give classes should even a single student present themselves.

These police-state tactics have been warmly applauded by big business and the corporate-controlled media. Their goal is not only to break the student strike, but to send a menacing warning to all those opposed to the sweeping austerity measures being implemented by governments across Canada and around the

world.

Only the working class is capable of offering a progressive alternative to the bankrupt capitalist system and it is to this mighty social force that Quebec's striking students and their supporters must now turn. The student strike must become the catalyst for a working class counter-offensive against the destruction of jobs and public services. A first step would be to launch an appeal to teachers and workers in the education sector to join together in a common struggle for the defense of quality public education at all levels.

But first students will have to break with the protest politics promoted by the three province-wide student associations, including by CLASSE ("The Broader Coalition of the Association for Student-Union Solidarity"). Although CLASSE, which initiated the strike movement, criticizes the FECQ (the Quebec Federation of College students) and FEUQ (the Quebec Federation of University Students) for their ties to the big business Parti Quebecois, it otherwise shares their perspective of pressuring the establishment for concessions and opposing a struggle to mobilize the working class in Quebec and across Canada.

Students must reject the politics of protest: The tuition fee increases are part of the Charest government's broader austerity agenda of social spending cuts, privatization, and increased regressive taxes and user fees—an agenda that every level of government and party is pursuing across Canada and internationally. If the government is employing authoritarian and anti-democratic methods against the students, it is because it recognizes that the student strike is an implicit challenge to its efforts to place the burden of the global capitalist on working people. Time and again, big business spokesmen and editorial writers for the corporate media draw the connection between defeating the students and imposing this broader austerity agenda. Thus in Friday's *La presse* editor-in-chief André Pratte, wrote, "If the Charest government 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."

While the ruling elite's strategy is based on the recognition of

the student strike's broader significance, the student associations insist on limiting it to a single-issue protest aimed at pressuring the government for talks. They oppose any effort to mobilize the working class to defeat the ruling class' austerity program and advance its own plan to resolve the social and economic crisis at the expense of big business. Orientated to the established order, all the student associations have to propose is noisier protests ... and ultimately capitulation in the face of the government's intransigence.

CLASSE continues to promote the illusion that the tuition fee increases are simply a poor policy choice and that everything can be set right at the bargaining table. But, in what must be taken as a warning that it is preparing to surrender in the face of the mounting repression, it is increasingly claiming that the strike is a victory irrespective of its outcome. Speaking earlier this week CLASSE spokesman Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois, declared the strike "is already victorious" in that it "has shown us... the road of resistance."

Students must oppose an orientation to the trade unions: After isolating the student strike, by refusing to make it an instrument for a working-class mobilization against the austerity measures of the Charest government, the CLASSE leadership is now speaking about the need for students to turn to the trade union apparatuses for support. In a recent speech, Nadeau-Dubois called for the revival of "the tradition of trade union struggles" in Quebec. But the unions in Quebec and Canada as around the world function not as organizations of working-class struggle, but as enforcers of capitalist "competitiveness", that is, profitability. For decades, they have actively collaborated with the ruling class to smother worker resistance to the sacrifices demanded by the financial markets, while dividing Quebec workers from their class brothers and sisters elsewhere in Canada and around the world. During the last student strike in 2005, the trade union bureaucrats used their political and financial muscle to prevail on the student associations to make "compromises" so as to preserve "social peace". In the current strike, they are playing the role of advisors to the Charest government, proposing, for example, that the government proclaim a one-year moratorium on the implementation of its tuition fee increases.

A turn to the working class means assisting the workers in breaking free of the pro-capitalist trade unions and building new organizations of working class struggle.

Students must reject nationalism: While the Charest government and corporate media regularly refer to the higher tuition fees charged by universities in other Canadian provinces to try to justify hiking those in Quebec, CLASSE makes no appeal to students or workers in other parts of Canada. In so doing, it adapts to the established political order, under which Quebec and Canadian nationalism, each expressing the interests

of various factions of the Canadian bourgeoisie, are used to divide the working class in Canada along linguistic and provincial lines. Moreover, CLASSE makes no reference to the international situation, which reveals the stark reality of class relations as they exist throughout the world and the impossibility of defending the interests of working people through protests to the capitalist elite. In Greece, for example, financial markets have installed a government of "technocrats", which has imposed the destruction of tens of thousands of jobs, reductions of more than 30 percent in public sector wages, and radically reduced pension benefits.

Students must oppose the subordination of the working class to the Parti Québécois (PQ): A key element in the unions' betrayal of the working class has been their decades-long support for the PQ. FECQ and FEUQ, both of which have long been closely aligned with the trade union bureaucracy, have announced that the "next step" in the student struggle should be to target the ten Liberal MNAs (Members of the National Assembly) who are "most vulnerable" to defeat in the next election. The FECQ and FEUQ strategy is simply a thinly veiled appeal in support of the PQ, which FECQ and FEUQ have repeatedly hailed as an "ally" in the fight against the tuition fee increases. In reality the PQ is as ruthless an instrument of big business as the Liberals. It slashed social and public services and oversaw the elimination of tens of thousands of jobs in the health and education sectors between 1995 and 1998; then, when its "zero deficit" objective was achieved, it slashed taxes on big business, the rich and super-rich.

A turn to the working class signifies, above all, a struggle for its mobilization as an independent political force. This mobilization will only be realized in opposition to the sclerotic union bureaucracy and bourgeois political parties such as the PQ and Québec Solidaire, and on the basis of a socialist program for social equality. We call on students who share this perspective to join the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE), the youth wing of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), and to become regular readers of the World Socialist Web Site.



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