

Quebec government seeks to intimidate, split striking students

Keith Jones
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Over the course of the past week, Quebec's Liberal government has escalated its efforts to break the two-month old strike of students opposed to its plan to increase university tuition fees by 75 percent over the next five years.

With the enthusiastic support of big business and the corporate media, the government and state apparatus are using intimidation and repression against the students, while also trying to split them by excluding the more militant of the three province-wide student federations from proposed talks.

Mass arrests of students are now a routine daily occurrence. The courts have issued numerous injunctions limiting, and in some cases outright banning, picketing and ordering the resumption of classes over the opposition of the majority of students and in many cases the faculty. At the government's urging, universities and CEGEPs (pre-university and technical colleges) are ordering instructors to teach and administer evaluations even if a single student comes to class.

At a press conference Thursday, Max Roy, the president of the province's largest union of university professors (*la Fédération québécoise des professeurs d'université*) denounced the authorities' attempt to conscript professors into their campaign to break the strike and the climate of intimidation that now reigns on university campuses across Quebec.

"The obligation to teach, in these circumstances," said Roy, "leads to discrimination. It places professors in an untenable position where they are forced to arbitrate conflicts of opinion and defy decisions taken democratically by duly-constituted student associations."

Roy also vigorously condemned security guards and the police for intimidating his organization's members:

"A climate of fear is being imposed on university campuses, something that was hitherto unimaginable and is absolutely unacceptable."

To the consternation of the government and corporate media some 170,000 university and CEGEP students remain on strike. Although the government prevailed on the Federation of CEGEPs to threaten students at the 22 strike-hit CEGEPs with the canceling of their semester if the strike didn't end this week, students at virtually every CEGEP remain on strike.

Last Sunday, Education Minister Line Beauchamp announced that she would be ready to meet with the leaders of FEUQ (the Quebec University Students' Federation) and FECQ (the Quebec College Students' Federation), organizations which have close ties to the big business Parti Québécois and the trade unions.

But adhering to the line the government has taken throughout the strike, Beauchamp ruled out any discussion of the students' demands for the tuition fee hikes to be repealed.

Rather Beauchamp said she wants the talks to discuss FEUQ's and FECQ's call for the establishment of a watchdog committee to review university expenditures. The student associations contend that university administrations, which are increasingly intertwined with big business, have inflated their executives' salaries and engaged in various building projects and expansion schemes that have little if anything to do with providing education.

Undoubtedly the universities' ever-growing dependence on corporate donations and big business partnerships—as a result of both cutbacks and the marketization of education and research—undoubtedly is having a perverse impact on the functioning of universities. But the call for a tripartite committee to scrutinize university expenditures is a reactionary

diversion that plays into the government's rightwing austerity agenda.

It accepts the reactionary fiscal framework created by more than two decades of budget cuts at the federal and provincial level and by successive rounds of tax reductions for big business and the rich.

FECQ and FEUQ quickly accepted the government's offer of talks. But to date no official meetings have been held, because the two student associations have called, albeit reluctantly, for CLASSE ("The Broader Coalition of the Association for Student-Union Solidarity"), the third student association, to be included as well.

It is, however, an open secret that back channel discussions are underway. In 2005, FEUQ and FECQ torpedoed the last province-wide student strike when they were offered minor concessions by the government. At that time the unions, which feared the radicalizing impact the students' strike could have on half-a-million public sector workers who were facing concessions demands from the government, played a major role in pressing FEUQ and FECQ to reach a "compromise" with the government in the name of preserving "social peace." Subsequently, the Charest Liberal government imposed a concessions-filled seven-year contract on the public sector workers by decree with barely a whimper of protest from the unions.

During the past week the Charest Liberal government and the media have mounted a campaign to demonize CLASSE as a quasi-subversive organization on the spurious grounds that it has failed to condemn various acts of vandalism reputedly committed by striking students. In fact CLASSE has made clear it does not support such tactics, while noting that the government has failed to criticize the violent attacks police have mounted against striking students, including one incident in which a student lost an eye.

Nonetheless CLASSE has announced it is ready to join the talks with the government, no matter that the Liberals are adamant that there will be no discussion of the demand that has animated the strike movement—the repeal of the university tuition fee hike.

Politically under the influence of various Maoist and anarchist groups, CLASSE has mounted the student strike as a single-issue protest. While it has criticized FEUQ and FECQ for their ties to the PQ, it shares their basic political outlook of pressuring the government

and is adamantly opposed to a turn by the students to the working class as the only social force that can provide a progressive alternative to big business' austerity agenda.

CLASSE's leadership has been completely taken aback by the intransigence of the government and corporate media. But the hostility of the capitalist elite—which is born of their understanding that the striking students' insistence that education should be a social right represents an implicit challenge to their drive to make the working class pay for the capitalist crisis—points, if properly understood, to the way forward. The student strike must become the catalyst for the mobilization of the entire working class against the austerity measures being implemented by the Charest Liberal government and by all levels of government across Canada.



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