

NDP abets suppression of Quebec student strike

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The response of the trade-union supported New Democratic Party (NDP) to the strike by students in Quebec has exposed it as a supporter of the anti-democratic austerity policies of the ruling class.

The Quebec student strike has continued beyond its 100th day. Students and a growing number of youth and workers are now in defiance of the government's anti-democratic Bill 78, which seeks to put an end to widespread protests against tuition fee increases by criminalizing any movement that challenges big business and its political representatives.

Canada's ruling elite has expressed itself with unanimity in its press and through its traditional political organs. It stands with the Quebec Liberal government in favour of austerity and against students and young workers, whose future prospects are being sacrificed for the profits of the country's superrich.

Moreover, the students' unions as well as the Quebec trade unions and the Parti Quebecois (PQ) seek to limit the students' activities to single-issue protest, to prevent the strike from becoming the catalyst for a movement of the entire working class against the savage cuts demanded by the capitalist elite.

While students and workers continue their struggle, the social-democratic NDP has professed a policy of strict neutrality—demonstrating yet again its basic support for austerity measures at the expense of social programs and workers' living standards. In defending this position, party leader Thomas Mulcair used the dubious explanation that tuition fees are “first and foremost a provincial matter.”

Mulcair, who is shepherding the party ever further rightwards, was a former Quebec cabinet minister in Quebec's current Charest Liberal government. The party has insisted that its members remain silent on the issue.

He further claimed that the NDP's fight was “not with the Charest government”, but with the federal Conservatives. The NDP's job, Mulcair went on, is to “make sure” that Stephen Harper's Conservatives—the most right-wing government in the country's history—will increase federal transfer payments to the provinces.

The mainstream press has treated this professed “neutrality” as a political calculation made in light of the NDP's recent elevation to the position of Official Opposition, largely due to a shift of votes in Quebec from the separatist Bloc Quebecois to the NDP. According to these commentators, the NDP has “nothing to gain” from either supporting the students or the Charest government, as either move might alienate potential voters in the province.

In fact, the NDP's tacit approval of the Charest government's assault on the students in Quebec is meant to further demonstrate to the Canadian bourgeoisie that the NDP is willing to serve as the “left” party of austerity. That is, they are capable of imposing reactionary rollbacks on workers' wages and cuts to social services such as unemployment insurance, health care, and education that demanded by ruling classes the world over.

The NDP shares this perspective with other social democratic and “left” parties, such as France's recently elected Socialist Party, the Labour parties of Britain and Australia, the German SPD and Left parties, and Greece's PASOK. All of these corrupt pro-capitalist organizations have, in recent years, overseen or called for the destruction of the post-war reforms won by workers through bitter struggle.

Indeed, just as the Quebec student strike escalated, the NDP ensured that the minority Ontario Liberal government was able to pass its own assault on workers

by again “abstaining” from voting on its 2012 budget.

At a staggering \$15 billion over the next three years, the bill included cuts roughly four times as large as those passed by the Harris Conservative government in the late 1990s. Its measures will eliminate thousands of hospital beds and imposes a wage-freeze on public sector workers.

Significantly, self-styled “education premier” Dalton McGuinty’s budget cut nine scholarship programs and increased already steep tuition fees by an average of five percent. Ontario students collectively owe around \$9 billion dollars in loans for their education.

Federally, the NDP was also quiet on the Conservative government’s omnibus bill that includes savage cuts to unemployment insurance (EI). The most outrage the party could muster was a call for the bill to be split up into its smaller parts and studied by various committees. Embracing the language of the right-wing parties, Canada’s “left alternative” decried the EI changes as amounting to the imposition of the “nanny state on employees and employers”.

The Canadian Federation of Students (CFS), Canada’s largest student organization, routinely promotes the NDP as the party of students by gifting the party’s provincial and federal sections with “A-grades” in its Report Cards on election platforms. Generally, the NDP need only make empty and vague promises about minor increases in university and college funding to ensure rapturous praise from the CFS about the NDP’s “meaningful commitments”.

Meanwhile, whenever the NDP has taken power in the Canadian provinces, it has forced through budget cuts and fee hikes in lock-step with their Liberal and conservative counterparts.

In Ontario, Bob Rae’s NDP government oversaw a 57 percent increase in tuition fees along with a raft of other anti-working class measures during the early 1990s. After several years of a false tuition freeze that allowed for loopholes routinely exploited to increase fees, the NDP in Manitoba raised tuition in 2009. The present Nova Scotia NDP government has twice cut funding to post-secondary education while raising fees.

On foreign policy, the NDP has played a key role in covering up the Canadian ruling elite’s revival of militarism in defence of its own imperialist interests. In its first major vote as the Official Opposition, the NDP voted to extend Canada’s participation in the war

against Libya—a war whose transparent purpose was the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime and its replacement with one even more subservient to North American and European imperialism.

Students and workers in Quebec and throughout Canada must draw the necessary conclusions from the exposure of social democracy as ruthless enforcers of capitalist austerity on the backs of the working class. As the NDP’s silence on the student strike underscores, the choice for the working class is not between the Conservatives and the “lesser evil” of the NDP or the PQ.

Either workers will take power into their own hands or they will face the continued brutality of their class enemies, who count among their representatives all of the official parties, including the NDP.



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