

Quebec scuttles talks with striking students, unveils plan to nearly double tuition fees

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Claiming that it is impossible to negotiate with the province's striking university and CEGEP (pre-university and technical college) students, Quebec Liberal Premier Jean Charest and Education Minister Line Beauchamp unveiled a "global solution for university accessibility" last Friday.

The Liberal government's "solution" is a transparent attempt to break the almost three-month-long student strike and to legitimize a further escalation of state repression. It substitutes a \$1,779 or 84 percent increase in university tuition fees spread over seven years for the government's original plan to raise them by \$1,625 or almost 75 percent over five years. By raising the income threshold at which students can have access to government-backed loans, it would encourage students trying to cope with the tuition fee increases to go deeper into debt.

Tabled 48 hours after the government scuttled negotiations with the three Quebec-wide student associations, the Liberal government's "solution" would also give a small number of additional students access to government bursaries, promises the eventual introduction of a student loan repayment scheme tied to post-graduation income, and calls for the establishment of a tripartite committee to monitor university expenditure.

So as to make clear to the ruling elite that this scheme contains no significant concession to the striking students, Premier Charest boasted that it will not cost Quebec's government a single penny. The \$50 million required to fund the new plan will be raised by reducing the value of an education tax credit and by cutting funding for the province's universities.

To the government's dismay, its "solution" was quickly and all but uniformly rejected.

"This offer will not be sufficient to halt the strike," said Leo Bureau-Blouin, the president of the Quebec Federation of College Students (FECQ), Friday afternoon. A congress of CLASSE ("The Broader Coalition of the Association for Student-Union Solidarity") held over the weekend unanimously rejected the government's plan. And the Quebec Federation of University Students (FEUQ), which is

to officially announce its position today, has indicated that its member associations are massively opposed.

Thousands of students marched in Montreal on Friday and Saturday to reaffirm their demand that the tuition fee hikes be rescinded in toto. The Saturday protest was themed "This is not an offer, it is an insult." Demonstrations also took place in Gatineau and Quebec City.

In recent days students at the Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu, Ahuntsic, and Outaouais CEGEPs have reaffirmed their support for the strike, which is now in its twelfth week. On Monday, students amassed outside CEGEP St. Laurent in Montreal to prevent a court-ordered resumption of some classes. 180,000 students, about 40 percent of all Quebec's post-secondary students, are continuing to boycott classes, with tens of thousands now entering their twelfth week of strike.

Viewing the students' struggle as an intolerable challenge to its austerity program of social spending cuts and user-fee and regressive-tax hikes, the Charest government has increasingly resorted to police repression to try to break the strike.

Riot police have repeatedly declared student protests "illegal" and used batons, tear gas, pepper spray, stun grenades—and even rubber bullets—to terrorize and disperse crowds of students.

Last week Public Security Minister Robert Dutil publicly declared that "CLASSE, manifestly, encourages violence" and suggested that its spokesman, the 21-year-old Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois, could face criminal charges. In fact Nadeau and CLASSE have repeatedly disassociated themselves from all violence, while defending students' right to engage in civil disobedience.

Dutil's slanders are contradicted even by Montreal Police Chief Marc Parent who said last week that not the students in general or CLASSE, but a group of "provocateurs and casseurs" are responsible for the acts of vandalism that have marred some protests.

Of course, Parent's remarks are themselves a gross distortion. On numerous occasions the police have incited

violence, by brutally attacking students and declaring their protests illegal. Moreover, one can be certain that police agents-provocateurs are active among the “Black Block” anarchists who are said to have broken storefront windows and committed other acts of petty vandalism.

At the Friday night student protest in Montreal, protesters intervened to prevent the breaking of a storefront window. Yet this did not prevent the police from declaring the demonstration illegal and dispersing it barely an hour after it began. Earlier in Quebec City, 80 demonstrators were arrested for “loitering” and each fined \$444.

The courts have also been mobilized against the students. At least 25 injunctions have been issued to force the resumption of classes over the objection of the majority of students. With only one exception, these injunctions have been granted on the basis of arguments that bring “into question the legality of student associations’ right to strike,” observed Judge Genevieve Marcotte last week in rendering her own decision illegalizing picketing at the Collège de Maisonneuve.

The antidemocratic measures directed against the students are endorsed wholeheartedly by the big business media. Montreal’s dailies have published lurid and false accounts of student violence, while downplaying if not completely ignoring the police violence. And they have applauded the government’s decision to exclude CLASSE from the negotiations last Wednesday and then cancel them entirely. In his latest editorial regurgitating government propaganda, *La Presse* editor André Pratte declared, “As the tuition fee increases are necessary, the Charest government was right to stand firm [in expelling CLASSE from the talks and refusing to discuss any modification to its tuition fee hike plan.]”

The Charest government is committed to forcibly imposing the austerity measures demanded by the ruling class across Canada and around the world. It also aims to use the students as an example, so as to intimidate workers from resisting the widening assault on jobs, wages and public services. Hence the provocative actions taken by the government last week, including sabotaging the negotiations, smearing CLASSE as a violent organization, and then on Friday repackaging the tuition increases as the “solution” to university accessibility.

As *La presse* columnist Alain Dubuc, an adept defender of Quebec’s capitalist elite, explained, “The Charest government’s goal in meeting [with student leaders] was essentially to have them accept in principle the fee increases that they oppose.” By firing Friday’s ultimatum over the heads of student leaders, it was trying to “create divisions between CLASSE and other, more moderate student

organizations.”

But the government has significantly underestimated the level of anger that exists among students, who are struggling to make ends meet even as they take on ever growing mountains of debt.

“It was expected that the movement would fade out on its own after the Easter holidays,” conceded *La Presse*. Instead, the strike has become increasingly radicalized.

To prevail over the Charest government and its big business backers, students must turn to the working class and make their strike the catalyst for the independent political mobilization of workers in Quebec and across Canada against all wage and job cuts and the dismantling of public services.

While the government has been taken aback by students’ tenacity, it still has important cards to play. It can intensify police and judicial repression, brandish the threat of class cancellations, and exploit the single-issue protest orientation of the student associations, which separates the student movement from a broader challenge to the bourgeoisie’s austerity agenda as a whole.

Above all, it can depend on the union bureaucracy. The unions have kept the striking students isolated, refusing to call on workers to come to their defense, while pressing the students to moderate their demands and put their faith in the big business Parti Quebecois (PQ).

In recent days, in the name of “preserving social peace” the unions have been urging the government to proclaim (and the students to accept) a one-year moratorium on the introduction of the tuition fee hikes. “We’ve had conversations with them [the striking students] and we have advised them to negotiate with Minister Beauchamp,” said Quebec Federation of Labour President Michel Arseneault.

For decades Quebec’s unions have politically subordinated workers to the ruling class through their alliance with the Parti Quebecois (PQ). A party of big business that imposed massive cuts in health and education when last in office, the PQ is posturing as an opponent of the tuition fee hikes. But it has not ruled out raising university tuition fees should it win the next election and it has repeatedly attacked the Liberals for not cutting social spending steeply and quickly enough.



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