

Unions and student associations betray Quebec student strike

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The deal signed on Saturday by Quebec's student associations, under pressure from the provincial Liberal government and the leaders of Quebec's three major trade union federations, is a betrayal of the students who have fought for the past twelve weeks for the principle that education should be a social right.

Under the agreement, the government's \$1,779 (82 percent) hike in university tuition fees over seven years—the policy that provoked the longest student strike in Quebec history—is to be fully implemented. The Charest Liberal government will thus achieve its principal objective: the further extension of the “user pays” principle in post-secondary education as part of a broader austerity program of social spending cuts, tariff-ication, and regressive tax hikes that is aimed at making the working class and youth pay for the world capitalist crisis.

In another political victory for the government, the agreement calls for the student associations and the unions to be enlisted in its drive to reduce university budgets through the creation of a provisional, and eventually permanent, committee to scrutinize university spending.

This committee, which will be dominated by the representatives of the government and big business, will work entirely within the fiscal framework established by the government and the ruling elite—the overt lie that there “is not enough money” to sustain government spending on public and social services. Its mandate, to find savings through more “efficient” management of universities, cannot be realized other than by pitting students against teachers, eliminating the programs deemed least valuable to big business, and undermining the education system with further cuts.

The presidents of the Quebec Federation of Labour, Confederation of National Trade unions, and *Centrale des Syndicats du Québec* (Federation of Quebec Unions) attended Friday's and Saturday's talks and used their political influence and financial muscle to bully the student associations into surrendering to the government.

For the unions, Saturday's entente is a continuation of

their pursuit of ever-closer collaboration with big business and the state through formalized tripartite (business, union, and government) committees and institutions which serve to ensure the “profitability” of Quebec enterprises through layoffs, speed-up, wage cuts, and the dismantling of public services.

Moreover, the union leaders have once again demonstrated to the ruling class that they can be counted on, to employ their own words, to “uphold social peace”—that is, to torpedo any movement of resistance among workers and youth that might undermine the existing capitalist order.

In its drive to break popular opposition to the tuition fee hikes, the Charest government has resorted to increasing state repression, using the courts to issue injunctions restricting students' right to strike and the police to terrorize students with baton charges, tear gas, sound grenades, and arbitrary arrests. On Friday, even as government negotiators were threatening student representatives with the cancelling of the winter semester, several students were badly injured when police brutally suppressed a protest outside the Liberal Party's congress in Victoriaville. These include a CEGEP Saint-Laurent student who suffered serious head trauma and came close to losing his life, after being shot in the face with a rubber bullet.

While unprecedented in the recent history of Quebec, the state violence did not succeed in breaking the resolve of the students, whose struggle has been animated by anger over the establishment's indifference to their concerns and a sense that their future is at stake.

The provincial government and the Quebec and Canadian ruling elite depended on the unions to keep the Quebec students' struggle isolated and then to help them cajole students into abandoning their opposition to the tuition fee hikes. “The trade unions were very happy... to work to put into place a road map that, from our point of view, will allow us to resolve the actual crisis,” declared CNTU President Louis Roy after, to the government's great satisfaction, Saturday's entente was signed.

In foisting this deal on Quebec' students, the government

has also drawn on the assistance of the province's student associations. On FECQ (the Quebec Federation of College Students) and FEUQ (the Quebec Federation of University Students), both of which have longstanding ties to the union bureaucracy and the big business Parti Quebecois, but also on CLASSE (The Broader Coalition of the Association for Student-Union Solidarity), the student association that spearheaded the strike movement.

To sell this betrayal to their members, the student leaders have emphasised a clause in Saturday's deal that stipulates that any saving identified by the new watchdog committee on university finances will be used to lower the administrative fees that universities charge students on top of the government-regulated tuition fees. These administrative fees currently cost students on average \$800 per year. Furthermore, pending the release of the watchdog committee's first report, universities will reduce their administrative fees for the Fall 2012 semester by \$125 (almost exactly the same amount as tuition fees are to be increased) and this arrangement can be repeated for the winter 2013 term if the report is still forthcoming.

The leaders of the student associations are trumpeting the possibility of lowered administrative fees notwithstanding that it is vague and hypothetical—students will have to reimburse even the \$125 if no saving are found—to claim Saturday's deal is at least a partial victory. The agreement is “proof that the strike has borne fruit,” declared Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois, the media spokesman for CLASSE. “We are gambling that we can cancel out the hike in tuition fees with a diminution of those [administrative] fees with healthy management of the universities,” affirmed FEUQ President Martine Desjardins.

The reality is that in accepting Saturday's agreement, the student associations have agreed to gamble with government loaded-dice. The student associations have the right to only four representatives on the new university financial watchdog committee. Six members will be appointed by the university rectors (who have strongly supported the tuition fee hikes), two by big business, one by CEGEP (pre-university and technical college) administrators, and two (including the president of the committee) by the Minister of Education. The trade unions will have four representatives.

There is no doubt that this council—controlled by the representatives of the government and big business and counting among its members hardened defenders of the capitalist system from the trade union bureaucracy—will fully adopt the program of the ruling class, to restrict access to post-secondary education and further subordinate it to the demands of big business.

“We have maintained our position,” boasted Natural Resources Minister Clement Gignac. “We hope that the

committee can identify savings, but it is not automatic.”

Fearing a hostile reaction, the leaders of the three student associations are not formally calling on students to ratify the deal they struck with the government last weekend. But this is a patent ruse. In signing they deal, they not only officially agreed to present it to their members, they “committed not to organise any demonstrations linked to this deal.”

The student associations have led the student strike into a blind alley, framing it as a single-issue protest around the question of tuition fees. They have refused to mount a broader struggle against the austerity program of the Charest and federal Conservative governments. They have rejected the only road that would allow students to further their struggle: a turn to the working class, the only social force capable of challenging big business's stranglehold over economic life and prosecuting the struggle for social equality.

In addition to promoting the pro-capitalist trade union bureaucracy, the leaders of the student associations have fostered illusions in the Parti Quebecois, a big business party that savagely cut spending on health care and education when it was last in power and has recently criticised the Liberal government from the right, for not reducing the budget deficit fast enough.

Defending the betrayal concluded Saturday with the Charest government, FEUQ President Martine Desjardins suggested that a PQ government would be more favourable to the demands of students. “It is very likely that the deal... could change providing that... the Liberals are no longer in power,” she affirmed.

Students must reject Saturday's entente and reorient their strike on the basis of a turn to the working class in Quebec and across Canada and a fight to make their moment the catalyst for the mobilization of the working class against the austerity measures being pursued by all levels of government and the entire political establishment. Whatever the outcome of the vote on the renewal of the strike—Saturday's sellout deal has already been rejected by students from at least half a dozen CEGEPs—the central question is the need to develop an independent political movement of the working class, outside of and in opposition to the pro-capitalist trade unions, for a workers' government committed to reorganizing economic life to secure social rights, including the right to a quality education for all, at all levels.



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