

Quebec students reject union-promoted sellout of their fight for accessible education

A WSWWS reporting team
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University and CEGEP [pre-university and technical college] students have overwhelmingly rejected the agreement that was reached last Saturday between the Quebec Liberal government and leaders of the three province-wide student associations to end a three-month long student strike.

After affixing their signatures to the entente, student leaders touted it as a partial victory. But subsequently they refused to publicly call for its ratification for fear of a hostile reaction among students.

The entente completely abandons the students' fight for education to be recognized as a social right.

The government, as Liberal cabinet ministers were quick to point out, did not cede an inch on its plan to raise university tuition fees by \$1779 or 82 percent over the next seven years, beginning this September. Moreover, the entente makes student leaders auxiliaries in implementing the government's cost-cutting agenda by giving them seats on a new university finance watchdog committee, dominated by state and big business representatives. "Savings" identified by this committee will be used to reduce the administrative fees charged students.

In an obvious gimmick, the government agreed, as the watchdog committee's report would be pending, to give students a rebate this September on their administrative fees of \$125 (virtually the same amount as the tuition fees are to rise.) But if the committee does not identify sufficient savings, students will be ordered to repay even this puny sum. (For a more detailed examination of the entente see: "Unions and student associations betray Quebec student strike")

The unions, which have feigned support for the students while systematically isolating their struggle, played a pivotal role in pressuring student leaders into accepting the government's terms. Participants in all 22 hours of negotiations held on Friday, May 4 and Saturday, May 5, the presidents of Quebec's three major labor federations were adamant that the student leaders accept the entente. "We told them," Confederation of National Trade Unions President

Louis Roy told the *Montreal Gazette*, "that they got the maximum from the government that day; that the government will not go any further."

In the days preceding last weekend's talks, the union leaders had repeatedly voiced their alarm that "social peace," i.e. big businesses unfettered domination of social-economic and political life, was threatened by the confrontation between the government and the students.

To the dismay of the government, the corporate media, and all sections of the establishment, including the union officialdom, the 170,000 striking students have overwhelmingly repudiated the entente.

As of Wednesday evening, students at fourteen CEGEPs had rejected the entente, while those at only two had voted in favor. And students from not a single striking university department had endorsed the proposed agreement.

Yesterday, CLASSE (The Broader Coalition of the Association for Student-Union Solidarity), became the first of the three student associations to go on record as rejecting the entente.

The other two—FECQ (the Quebec Federation of College Students) and FEUQ (the Quebec Federation of University Students)—have indicated they might be willing to accept the government's offer of a reworded agreement.

FEUQ President Martine Desjardins, for example, has taken exception to statements by Education Minister Line Beauchamp and other Liberal ministers that it is the task of the student representative on the watchdog committee and not all its members to look for "efficiencies"—as if this in anyway changes the character of the entente.

FECQ and FEUQ are formally aligned to the trade union bureaucracy through the so-called Social Alliance and have repeatedly termed the big business party supported by the unions, the Parti Quebecois, an ally of the students.

While CLASSE's leadership uses more militant rhetoric, its perspective is fundamentally the same—to separate the students' opposition to the tuition fee hikes from any broader challenge to the austerity program of the Charest Liberal government and the federal Conservative

government; to seek a negotiated settlement based on the reactionary fiscal framework created by the political representatives of big business and with a government that has insisted for 13 weeks that the tuition fee hikes must be implemented in full and that has presided over an unprecedented campaign of repression against the striking students; to promote the union bureaucracy as an ally of the students.

"It's up to the government to act in this situation," said CLASSE spokesman Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois Thursday in announcing CLASSE's rejection of the entente. "It will require concrete acts to solve the situation. That means a new round of negotiations and not dealing with administrative fees, not dealing with loans and bursaries. They must deal at last with the tuition fees."

What in fact has been demonstrated over the past three months is that the conflict between the students and the government cannot be bridged by negotiation because it arises from a conflict between opposed class forces representing opposed programs. The government and the elite are determined to destroy what remains of the social gains made by the working class through the social struggles of the last century; while the students—albeit, only implicitly and this is at present the political Achilles heel of their movement—are opposing the ruling elite's austerity agenda and fighting for the notion that there are social rights.

If the students are to prevail in their struggle, they must make it the catalyst for the mobilization of the working class across Quebec and Canada against the big business assault on wages, jobs and public services and for the development of an independent working-class political movement aimed at radically reorganizing economic life so as to make human need, not private profit the animating principle.

The World Socialist Web Site spoke with students about last weekend's entente at a student demonstration in Montreal earlier this week. For more than two weeks, students and their supporters have been staging nightly marches through the downtown of Quebec's largest city.

"The last negotiations didn't give us enough," said Université de Montréal (UdM) student Mathieu. "It's 12 weeks that we have been on strike. I am very involved and have come to a lot of demonstrations. An offer like that is not enough. [If the entente is accepted], it will be a defeat for the student movement."

Mathieu's friend and UdM classmate, François-Xavier pointed to the duplicitous character of the proposed agreement. "The reduction they're giving us in first (i.e. the fall 2012) semester, we'll have to pay back, if they (the provisional watchdog committee) don't succeed in financing

it through cuts. It's a big 'if.'

"If I vote according to my values," continued Mathieu, "I'll vote for Quebec Solidaire (QS), but I need to take into account voting strategically. ... If I vote QS, it's a vote that will directly help the Liberals return to power."

QS is a Quebec nationalist "citizens'" party that claims to be a leftwing opponent of the big business PQ. But it has repeatedly offered to form an electoral alliance with the PQ to oppose the "right," the Liberals and the ADQ, now re-packaged as the *Coalition Avenir Quebec* (CAQ—Coalition for Quebec's Future).

Michel, a worker who had come out to show his support for the students, told the WSWWS the deal accepted by the student associations at the urging of the union leaders, "is not good enough."

"All the people here today, we say 'no'... [Quebec Premier Jean Charest] did this to look like he is trying to negotiate. I would never say 'yes' to this if I were a student.

"To me, there is so much money from banks, gas companies, pharmaceutical companies—they are making millions, so we can take some of that to let the students keep their minds on their studies.

"The question is: 'what next?' This government is helping out the higher class people. As for the rest of us, we have nothing. They keep all the money for the rich."

Dorothée told the WSWWS, the entente "sucks because there is absolutely no change... I thought that [the negotiations] were good, but I don't know why the associations agreed to this deal. They don't have the experience that the government has."

Ariane, said "this strike is about the type of society we chose. We're not as stupid as the [government and establishment] think."

"They have the money to avoid these cuts," said Laurence-Karl, "The banks have money but the government won't tax them."



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