

Quebec to adopt emergency law to break student strike

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Quebec's National Assembly was summoned into session yesterday evening so that the Liberal government could introduce emergency legislation aimed at breaking the 14-week province-wide student strike.

In announcing his government's intention to legislate against the students Wednesday, Quebec Premier Jean Charest postured as a defender of the right to protest and an opponent of violence. But the legislation is a transparent attempt to use state repression to quell popular opposition to the government's plans to raise university tuition fees by \$1,778 or more than 80 percent over the next seven years.

Quebec's and Canada's elite have strongly supported the Charest government's insistence that the tuition fee hikes are non-negotiable—for they want no breach in their across-the-board assault on public services and workers' living standards—and have responded with anger and derision to the students' call for education to be a social right.

The legislation, the first of its kind in Canadian history, is expected to dramatically increase the penalties under the criminal justice system for striking students and their supporters should they block or attempt to block entry to a post-secondary institution. It may also place limits on the number of people allowed to picket at a university or CEGEP (pre-university and technical college) facility.

To the consternation of the government, students, with the support of some teachers and parents, have repeatedly mounted mass pickets and thereby successfully thwarted the implementation of a spate of recent court injunctions that legally compel universities and CEGEPS to provide classes at the request of small numbers of students and, in some cases, lone individuals.

In addition to increasing penalties, the legislation will proclaim an absolute "right" of all Quebec post-secondary students to receive instruction irrespective of any boycott of classes democratically-decided by the student body. "In the law," declared Charest in his Wednesday evening televised address, "there will be a very clear affirmation that in Quebec we have the right to an education and we have a right of access to educational institutions."

The unmentioned corollary to this "right" is that university and CEGEP teachers will be conscripted, under threat of contractual sanctions, into assisting the government in breaking the strike.

The government has also decided to suspend till mid-August the completion of the winter semester at the 14 CEGEPs and 11 universities where students remain on strike.

The suspension of the semester has a double purpose. First, it is the government's hope that a three-month "pause" in the semester will enable it to wear down the students' resolve. Second, the lengthy interval will give it and the police time to prepare for what threatens to be an unprecedented police operation.

Supported by the corporate media, the government has sought, virtually since the strike began in February, to portray the students as violent. In reality, it is the police that have repeatedly provoked violent confrontations with the students. They have routinely used tear gas, baton charges, sound grenades and on several occasions—most notably at Victoriaville on May 4—rubber bullets to disperse student protests. Speaking in the National Assembly on Thursday, Charest once again sought to slander the students as violent, demanding that the student associations and the unions denounce "violence" even as his government was moving to criminalize the students' strike.

Emphasizing his government's resolve, Charest declared the imposition of the tuition fee hikes to be "seminal for the future of Quebec."

Charest's statement and the ferocity of the repression directed at the striking students flies in the face of government propaganda that the tuition fee hikes are no big deal and will cost students only pennies a day.

The government and corporate elite are determined to prevail because they recognize the student strike to be an implicit challenge to their entire class strategy. Across Canada governments at all levels and of every stripe within the official political spectrum are imposing austerity measures so as to make working people pay for the global

capitalist crisis.

In recent days there has been a growing clamour from the press and corporate leaders for the government to stamp out the student strike, with claims that Quebec is threatened by mob rule.

Francois Legault, a former Parti Quebecois (PQ) education minister and the head of the new right-wing *Coalition avenir Québec* (CAQ-Coalition for Quebec's Future), repeatedly demanded that the government mount an immediate police operation to reopen all strikebound CEGEPs and university departments. Now the CAQ is denouncing the government for "postponing the problem" until August.

With utter cynicism, the government and media have pointed to the fall in the number of striking students in recent weeks, under conditions where the government has been brandishing the threat that students could "lose their semester" and the courts and police have aggressively intervened against the strike, as "proof" that the opposition to the tuition hikes is confined to a noisy minority.

This is a lie. But there is no question that the students are dangerously isolated, even though they enjoy widespread popular support.

Responsibility for this lies first and foremost with the trade unions. While feigning support for the students, the unions have done nothing to mobilize the working class in support of the student strike. Rather, in the name of "social peace", they first urged the government to briefly delay the start of the tuition fee increases; then joined forces with the Charest government in seeking to foist upon the students an "entente" under which the tuition hikes were to be implemented in full and student and union representatives were to assist the government in scrutinizing and cutting university budgets.

The unions are seeking to divert the struggle against the tuition fee hikes into electoral support for their longtime ally, the big business PQ, a party which when it last held office implemented the steepest social spending cuts in Quebec history. Yesterday, the presidents of Quebec's three main labor federations held a joint press conference with PQ leader Pauline Marois, Amir Khadir of Quebec Solidaire, and the heads of FECQ (the Quebec Federation of College Students) and FEUQ (the Quebec Federation of University Students) to condemn the proposed strikebreaking law and plead with the Charest government to seek a negotiated settlement with the student associations.

As for the New Democratic Party (NDP), the party of the labor bureaucracy in English Canada, it has refused to issue even a press release in support of the students. Even though the majority of its MPs are from Quebec, it claims it cannot comment on the strike because it is a provincial matter. The truth is the NDP fears that any association with the students'

militant struggle will disrupt its attempts to convince Canada's ruling elite that it can supplant the Liberals as its "left" party of government. The NDP's new federal leader, Thomas Mulcair, it should be noted, is a former Charest cabinet minister and as such supported legislation that stripped half a million public sector workers of their right to strike and imposed on them seven-year concessionary contracts.

The politics of the student associations have also proven pivotal in enabling the government and elite to isolate the students. They have insisted on confining the student struggle to a single-issue protest, opposing linking the fight against the tuition fee hikes to a broader mobilization of the working class against the Charest Liberal and federal Conservative government's austerity measures.

Accepting the right-wing fiscal framework created by years of tax cuts for big business and the rich and opposed to any challenge to the existing social order, the student associations have promoted a series of reactionary proposals in recent weeks including freezing government grants to the universities and assisting the government in finding "economies" in university spending.

This is true not just of FECQ and FEUQ, but also of CLASSE (Broader Coalition of the Association for Student-Union Solidarity), the group which initiated the strike movement and has long-been critical of the two other student associations for their ties to the PQ.

Workers across Quebec and Canada must come to the defence of the striking students. Their struggle must serve as the catalyst for the development of a political and industrial offensive of the entire working class, independent of and in opposition to the unions and NDP, and directed against the Charest and federal Conservative governments and for the defence and expansion of social rights through the socialist reorganization of economic life.

See Full Coverage of the Quebec student strike



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