

Quebec student strike: Government excludes fee hikes, Bill 78 from proposed talks

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Quebec's Liberal government, which has been shaken by a 104-day strike of university and CEGEP (pre-university and technical college) students, is apparently about to summon leaders of the province-wide student associations for talks. These talks could begin as early as this weekend, but more likely will be slated for the beginning of next week.

Representatives of all three striking student federations—FECQ (the Quebec Federation of College Students), FEUQ (the Quebec Federation of University Students) and CLASSE (The Broader Coalition of the Association for Student-Union Solidarity)—say they have been told that an invitation for talks is impending.

Speaking to reporters Thursday, Education Minister Michelle Courchesne stressed that the government wants to ensure the talks are well-prepared before launching them: "On each side, we have agreed that we will take the necessary time to prepare, because you understand, it will be a very, very important meeting. What both sides want is to get out of the crisis."

All three student associations have said they will join the talks, although Courchene and other government officials have stipulated that they will not discuss any changes to the government's plan to hike university tuition fees by 82 percent over the next seven years or repealing or suspending application of Bill 78.

Adopted in less than 24 hours late last week, Bill 78 criminalizes the student strike by making it illegal for students to picket in the vicinity of university and CEGEP facilities and by threatening teachers with harsh criminal penalties unless they assist the government in breaking the student strike. Bill 78 also contains draconian restrictions on the right to demonstrate anywhere in Quebec and over any issue or cause. Demonstration organizers must submit to police in writing at least eight hours in advance the itinerary

and duration of their protest, agree to abide by any changes requested by police, and work alongside police to ensure that the police-prescribed demonstration route is followed. Failing that, the organizers and all participants in the demonstration are liable to criminal prosecution and massive fines.

At the government's urging, police are already applying the new restrictions on the right to protest outlined in Bill 72's Article 16. Montreal police have repeatedly used the lack of official permission for demonstrations to declare them illegal and violently disperse the protesters. In Quebec City and Sherbrooke scores of people have been charged with breaking Article 16, which imposes a minimum fine of \$1,000 for a first offence for demonstrators and \$7,000 for demonstration organizers.

On Wednesday evening, Montreal police arrested 518 participants in a single protest that had been peaceful for three hours, prior to police declaring it an illegal assembly and kettling—aggressively penning—those that remained. Close to 500 of the arrested were fined \$634 each under a new municipal bylaw. Passed by Montreal City Council the same day as Bill 78, the bylaw makes it illegal to participate in a demonstration whose itinerary has not been approved by the police or to wear a face-covering, even a scarf, while demonstrating.

Wednesday's arrests were reportedly the largest number ever made by Montreal police. Since Bill 78 was passed well over a thousand striking students and their supporters have been arrested. The total number of people arrested since the student strike began in February exceeds 2,500.

The government's offer of talks is a sham. Egged on by Canada's big business elite, it is determined to stamp out the student strike and push through the tuition fee increases, which are an important plank in its austerity program, exemplifying its push for the "user-pay" principle for public

services.

By feigning “flexibility” the government hopes to douse the groundswell of opposition to the draconian Bill 78 and to again call on the unions and the aspiring establishment politicians in the leadership of the student movement to assist it in imposing a sellout agreement on the students.

At the beginning of the month, the presidents of Quebec’s three main labor federations joined the student associations for talks with the government and prevailed on the leaders of FECQ, FEUQ and CLASSE to sign a sellout agreement. It called for the tuition increase to be implemented in full, beginning this September, and for the establishment of a government-business dominated tripartite committee in which student leaders were to assist the government in cutting university spending. Due to the overwhelming opposition of students, the agreement unraveled.

The three student associations have said that they have agreed to formulate a common negotiating position before the next round of talks with the government begin.

The leaders of FECQ and FEUQ enjoy particularly close ties to the union bureaucracy and to the Parti Quebecois (PQ), the big business party to whom the unions have for decades subordinated the working class. The PQ, with the unions’ full support, carried out the greatest social spending cuts in Quebec history between 1996 and 1998, then, when nurses rebelled in 1999, resorted to a savage strikebreaking law.

The leadership of CLASSE, while in the past critical of FECQ and FEUQ for their ties to the PQ, shares their perspective of pressuring the establishment. It has limited the strike movement to a single-issue protest over tuition fees in Quebec and vehemently opposes a turn to the working class. While vowing that it will not submit to the draconian provisions of Bill 78, CLASSE remains committed to reaching a negotiated settlement with the Liberal government.

In fact, what the past 15 weeks have demonstrated is that a decent future for young people, which means securing education and decent jobs as social rights, is incompatible not just with the Liberal government of Jean Charest, but with the entire capitalist social order. The student strike must become the catalyst for an independent political offensive of the working class in Quebec, across Canada and internationally in opposition to the ruling class drive to make working people pay for the global capitalist crisis through

job and wage cuts and the dismantling of public services.

The Quebec government and Canadian elite as a whole have been shaken by the scope and scale of the support for the student strike and the opposition to Bill 78.

Tuesday’s demonstration marking the 100th day of the strike was one of the largest in the history of Montreal, with estimates of the crowd ranging from 150,000 to 250,000.

Nightly protests in the city of Montreal have continued despite the threat of prosecution under Bill 78 and police violence. In recent days there have been evening protests in working class neighborhoods of Montreal announced by the clattering of pots, a technique employed by opponents of the Chilean dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet. So widespread is this phenomenon that “casserole,” a French word for pot, has repeatedly trended first on Twitter in Montreal.

On Thursday night hundreds of people took to the streets of Montreal’s Villeray neighborhood in one such “casserole” protest. CLASSE spokesman Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois, who lives in the area and joined the protest, told reporters, “Demonstrations like this one contradict Justice Minister Jean-Marc Fournier, who said civil disobedience is just a pretty word for vandalism.”

Also Thursday, Premier Jean Charest replaced Luc Bastien, his chief of staff since February 2011, with Daniel Gagnier, a former Alcan executive and ex-chief of staff with a reputation as a “political firefighter.” While Charest claimed the change had nothing to do with the student strike and the mass opposition to Bill 78, not even the pliant press corps could credibly argue this. Bastien is the second important member of the government to resign in the past three weeks. Line Beauchamp quit as education minister following the collapse of the agreement with the student associations. It subsequently emerged that Beauchamp had reservations about the wisdom of criminalizing the student strike.



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