

As state repression continues

Student associations in talks with Quebec government

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Quebec's province-wide student associations held talks Monday and Tuesday with the provincial Liberal government, even as it continued its drive to break the 16-week-long student strike through repression.

Quebec City police arrested 84 people Monday evening for participating in an "illegal" demonstration. Under Bill 78, an emergency law adopted May 18, the Liberal government has criminalized the student strike and placed sweeping new restrictions on the right to demonstrate, over any issue anywhere in Quebec.

In a provocation clearly staged to underline the government's resolve to enforce its authoritarian law and intimidate student leaders, police made Monday evening's mass arrests at the very point when a peaceful protest reached the building where government and student association representatives had been meeting. Philippe Lapointe and Justin Arcand, two negotiators for CLASSE (The Broader Coalition of the Association for Student-Union Solidarity), were among those detained by the police, but unlike the others were released without charge.

CLASSE leaders had said that Bill 78 would be the first issue they raised at the negotiations and threatened that they would walk out of the talks if the government was not prepared to discuss suspending or repealing parts of the repressive law.

But by Monday evening, they were singing a different tune. CLASSE's principal spokesman, Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois, praised Quebec Premier Jean Charest for joining the talks for 30 to 50 minutes (depending on the source). "The presence of Mr. Charest," said Nadeau-Dubois, "shows that the government recognizes the scale of the current crisis. It shows the government's sincere attitude toward the

negotiation process."

Students and the working class must beware. Negotiations held under the threat of the savage sanctions of Bill 78 can only be a sham.

Since the bill was adopted, police have arrested some 1,500 people—the vast majority of them for the "crime" of demonstrating. Most of the remainder have been arrested for "resisting" the police's violent dispersal of "illegal" demonstrations and use of kettling and other aggressive police tactics.

In justifying the need for Bill 78, the government claimed that it had exhausted all possibilities for negotiations with the student associations.

But it has been taken aback by the groundswell of popular opposition to Bill 78. On Tuesday May 22, more than 150,000 people demonstrated in support of the striking students and against Bill 78, in one of the largest demonstrations in Quebec history. The ensuing week has seen the eruption of nightly pot-banging marches in defiance of Bill 78—a phenomenon which has spread across Montreal's working-class neighbourhoods and from them to Quebec City, Sherbrooke, parts of suburban Montreal and by last weekend to such remote mining and industrial towns as Rouyn-Noranda and Sept-Isles.

Even the capitalist media has been forced to concede that Bill 78 has become the focus of deep-rooted popular anger against not just the Charest government, but the entire political and corporate establishment. And there is growing concern within the ruling class that the "contagion" could spread beyond Quebec to English Canada and the U.S.

So, while maintaining the threat of Bill 78, and no doubt reviewing options for even more draconian

measures, the Liberal government has once again turned to “negotiations” with the government-accredited student associations. Its aim is to enlist their help in ending the strike and defusing the opposition movement, thereby allowing it to press forward with its sweeping program of austerity measures, including social spending cuts, regressive taxes, new and increased user fees for public services and privatization.

On May 5, these very same student leaders agreed to an entente with the Charest Liberal government that called for the government’s planned 82 percent hike in university tuition fees to be implemented in full and that tied possible reductions in university administrative fees to the student associations’ collaboration with the government in identifying “economies,” i.e., in cutting university budgets.

This “sellout” agreement was overwhelmingly rejected by students, both by the more than 150,000 who remain on strike and the many tens of thousands of others who returned to classes in the face of repeated threats from the government that it would cancel their semester.

Accepting the government’s reactionary fiscal framework, FECQ (Quebec Federation of College Students) and FEUQ (Quebec Federation of University Students) have previously announced their support for the government freezing university funding for the next two years so as to finance a freeze in university tuition fees. Now the leaders of FECQ and FEUQ, as well as those of CLASSE are openly declaring their readiness to forsake their demand for a tuition fee freeze, let alone the struggle for education, including higher education, to be recognized as a social right.

“We come open-minded,” declared FECQ President Leo Bureau-Blouin,” as talks began Monday. “I think everyone understands that we must find a solution to the crisis.”

Unlike the negotiations that resulted in the May 5 sellout agreement, the heads of Quebec’s principal labor federations are not participating in the current talks. But they continue to play the pivotal role in isolating the students and preventing the eruption of a mass movement against the provincial Liberal government and the federal Conservative government, which is implementing its own program of sweeping austerity measures, including cuts to jobless benefits, and criminalizing working class resistance. On

Monday, the Conservatives tabled legislation illegalizing a strike by Canadian Pacific railway workers.

No sooner was Bill 78 signed into law, than the unions declared that they would comply with it, including provisions compelling them to press teachers into assisting the government in breaking the student strike.

As the negotiations unfold in Quebec City, the unions are using their political and financial influence over the student associations to press them to come to terms with the government, while promoting the lie that their longtime political ally, the big business Parti Quebecois (PQ), represents a progressive alternative to the Charest Liberals. In fact, when the PQ last held power, the unions collaborated with the government to impose the greatest social spending cuts in Quebec history.

As for the NDP, the political ally of the unions in English Canada, it has categorically refused to either support the striking students or denounce Bill 78 on the pretext that these are “provincial” issues.

The mass working class opposition to Bill 78 points the way forward both for the striking students and for the defence of democratic rights. The student strike must become the catalyst for the independent political mobilization of the working class across Canada against the entire class war agenda of big business and its political representatives: job and wage cuts, the dismantling of public services and the criminalization of the working class struggle.



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