

Talks continue between Quebec government, student groups over tuition protests

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Talks between Quebec's Liberal government and associations representing the province's university and CEGEP (pre-university and technical college) students failed to produce an agreement Wednesday, after student leaders rejected a government offer to scale back tuition fee increases by a mere \$35 per year. Negotiations continued late into the night.

Government officials made clear that they did not intend to back down on the lion's share of the 82 percent university tuition fee hike the Charest government is demanding, to try to impose the "user-pay" principle in the financing of public services.

They turned down a counter-proposal by student associations, who declined to state publicly what the contents of their counter-proposal were.

According to student negotiators, Bill 78—an anti-protest law that threatens the basic democratic rights of all Quebecers and sets a chilling precedent for the state suppression of dissent—has not been broached after three days of talks.

Adopted by Quebec's National Assembly in emergency session May 18, Bill 78 outlaws picketing by striking students and their supporters, threatens teachers with criminal sanctions if they do not assist the government in breaking the student strike, and legally compels student associations and trade unions to ensure that their members comply with the law.

Other provisions of Bill 78 represent a frontal assault on the rights of assembly and free speech. All demonstrations in Quebec—whatever their cause—are now illegal, unless demonstration organizers have submitted to police at least eight hours in advance the protest's itinerary and duration and abide by any changes ordered by police.

In the twelve days since Bill 78 was adopted, police have arrested some 1,500 striking students and their

supporters—the vast majority of them for demonstrating without police permission.

Entering the talks, leaders of at least two of the four student associations claimed that the suspension or repeal of parts of Bill 78 was vital to the outcome of the negotiations. But faced with the government's refusal to even discuss the issue, they quickly abandoned their demands relating to Bill 78.

They are now urging students and the population as a whole to put their faith in the courts, hoping they will strike down sections of the law because they violate the Canadian or Quebec Charters of Rights. Canada's Supreme Court, however, has repeatedly sanctioned egregious violations of democratic rights. Only last May it ruled that workers' have no constitutional right to form unions or bargain collectively.

The government, for its part, is determined to retain Bill 78—firstly, as a club with which to intimidate the striking students, who earlier this month repudiated an earlier sellout agreement negotiated by the student associations; secondly, because it wants to be able to use it, if need be, to stamp out the broader popular protests that have erupted since the passage of Bill 78 and are drawing in widening sections of the working class.

Yesterday's offer by the government would have reduced university tuition fee increases by \$35 per year. Instead of rising annually by \$254 for the next seven years, as the government had hitherto insisted, they would have risen by \$219 per year. But even this modest reduction was to be paid for by eliminating university tuition tax credits. The offer was turned down by student leaders, who feared it would be seen by rank-and-file students as an outright betrayal of their over 100-day struggle for the defense of education as a social right.

A previous agreement on May 5 which accepted the tuition fee hike was massively rejected by students.

Speaking Wednesday morning before the final bargaining session, Finance Minister Raymond Bachand rejected any suggestion that the government had buckled, emphasizing that the proposed agreement would not have cost the government a penny. “At the end of the exercise,” said Bachand, “we want to have strong universities and at the same cost for taxpayers. If at the same time, students can have a better deal, that’s good.”

Throughout the past 16 weeks the Quebec government, egged on by Canada’s big business elite, has insisted that the tuition increases must be imposed over the opposition of the students and the working class, arguing that students cannot be exempt from the government’s austerity program of social spending cuts, privatization, and increased regressive tax and user fees.

This intransigence is rooted in the drive of the ruling class in Canada and internationally to impose the full burden of the global capitalist crisis on working people.

According to press reports, the student association leaders pressed the government to reconfigure the tuition fee hikes so that the students would not actually have to pay increased fees in the coming school year. They hoped this would help them secure students’ acceptance of the agreement and bolster their reactionary claim that students should now carry forward their fight against the Liberals’ tuition fee increase by helping defeat the government in the next provincial election. These elections must be held by December 2013.

This is nothing more than backhand support for the big business Parti Quebecois, a party which now feigns support for the students, but which whenever it has held office has come into headlong conflict with the working class. Indeed, precisely because of the PQ’s close ties to the union bureaucracy and the illusion that it is somehow more receptive to the “people,” it has often proved better able than its federalist Liberal rivals in imposing the diktats of big business.



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