

How the NDP helps suppress the Quebec student strike and strengthens Harper

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Canada's social democratic party, the NDP, has proclaimed itself "neutral" in the struggle between Quebec's students and the provincial Liberal government and has remained mum on Bill 78—draconian legislation that criminalizes the four-month old student strike and places sweeping restrictions on the right to demonstrate anywhere in Quebec over any issue.

Federal NDP leader Thomas Mulcair has sought to justify the NDP's refusal to support the striking students and defend them from state repression by observing that education is a provincial matter under Canada's constitution and by arguing that the NDP must, in any case, focus on the fight against the federal Conservative government.

This is preposterous.

Can anyone doubt that Stephen Harper and his Conservative government stand four-square with the Quebec Liberal government in this battle? And can anyone claim that if Jean Charest and his Liberal government succeed in breaking the student strike, governments and employers from coast to coast will not invoke the students' defeat to intimidate and browbeat opponents of their assault on public services and workers' living standards and rights?

Even from the most narrow legal standpoint, there is no question that Bill 78 has huge cross-Canada implications, establishing chilling legal precedents for new attacks on the working class and democratic rights.

By refusing to support the students or even speak out against Bill 78, the NDP, the party of the trade unions in English Canada, is playing a pivotal role in preventing the working class across Canada from coming to the students' support, thereby leaving them to fight the Liberal government, the courts and the police alone. This strengthens not just Charest, but

Harper and his Conservative government, for they are implementing the same ruling class agenda.

The Liberals' 82 percent university tuition fee hike is part of a battery of austerity measures—social spending cuts, regressive taxes and new and increased user fees, the promotion of private health care, and the imposition of the "user-pay" principle for public services. The Conservatives, just in the past six months, have imposed a new health care funding arrangement designed to make Medicare unsustainable, raised the retirement age, changed the rules to Employment Insurance so that workers can be compelled to take 30 percent wage cuts, and gutted environmental regulation.

Moreover, in criminalizing the student strike, the government in Quebec City was following Ottawa's example. Repeatedly over the past year, the Harper government has used emergency legislation to legalize strikes and strip workers of their collective bargaining rights. Those targeted include Canada Post, Air Canada, and Canadian Pacific Railway workers.

Underscoring Canadian big business' support for the Charest government, the corporate media across Canada has churned out a stream of scurrilous editorials and comments that denounce the students as "selfish" for insisting that education should be a social right. The media has regurgitated the Quebec government's smears of student "violence."

It is not in the least surprising, but noteworthy just the same, that Harper's former mentor, one-time Reform Party leader Preston Manning, recently published a comment in the *Globe and Mail* in which he pointed to the student strike as evidence that Canada is "beginning to show symptoms of the 'Greek disease.'" This he defines as the refusal of the population to accept that "social entitlements to the public (in particular, education, health and pension benefits)" are

unsustainable.

The ruling class across Canada is determined to stamp out the student strike—and towards that end has applauded Bill 78—because it recognizes it to be a challenge to its drive to place the burden of the global capitalist crisis on the working class. The strike entails, as Manning's comments illustrate and the actions of the Charest and Harper government demonstrate, the dismantling of public services and the destruction of all the gains made by the working class through the convulsive social struggles of the last century.

The trade union-supported NDP has refused to support the student strike and maintained a complicit silence on Bill 78 because, like the rest of the political establishment, it views the student strike as a dangerous threat to the implementation of the austerity measures needed to maintain the competitive position, that is the profitability, of Canadian big business. Its greatest fear is that the strike will become a catalyst for the eruption of a working class counteroffensive against the austerity measures being pursued by governments at all levels across Canada and big business' drive for wage and job cuts.

While the NDP has worked to isolate the student strike, in Ontario, with the full support of the unions, it has struck a deal with the minority provincial Liberal government to enable passage of a budget containing savage austerity measures akin to those being implemented by Charest and Harper. These include \$15 billion in spending cuts over the next three years and cuts in the real wages of 1 million public-sector workers.

As for the question of provincial jurisdiction, this is not just a rotten alibi for siding with the Canadian ruling class against the students. It underscores the very conscious role that the NDP is playing in dividing the working class. The majority of the NDP's parliamentary delegation comes from Quebec. In the 2011 federal election working people in Canada's only majority French-speaking province massively rejected the traditional establishment parties—pro-federalist and pro-Quebec independence alike—and turned to the little known NDP in a confused attempt to reach out to other Canadians to oppose the ever-rightward shift of the politics of Canada's elite. A year later, the NDP and its union allies are isolating the student strike and the mass movement against Bill 78, thereby helping enforce the

divide between workers in Quebec and English Canada, a divide the bourgeoisie has always encouraged and manipulated so as to split the working class and safeguard its rule.

The auxiliary role the NDP is playing in the ruling class campaign to break the student strike should serve as a warning to all workers. The working class will be able to prosecute the struggle against big business's class-war agenda and its political representatives in the Quebec Liberal and federal Conservative governments only if it breaks politically and organizationally from the unions and the NDP and builds new organizations of struggle, above all a mass socialist party committed to resolving the economic crisis at the expense of the capitalists, not working people.



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