

The Quebec student strike and the need for a socialist program

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The Quebec student strike, now in its 16th week, has become a symbol and rallying point for opposition to austerity policies being implemented by all levels of government and all establishment parties across North America.

The collapse of the provincial Liberal government's latest attempt to bully the students into submission through this week's phony negotiations and the mass opposition that has erupted against the government's draconian anti-protest law, Bill 78, are to be welcomed.

The pivotal question is: what is the way forward?

The Liberal government, egged on by Canada's corporate elite, is determined to ram through the tuition fee hikes over mass opposition. To do so, it has run roughshod over basic democratic rights, criminalizing the student strike, placing sweeping restrictions on the right to demonstrate, and overseeing unprecedented police violence.

The single-issue protest perspective advanced by the student associations, which separates the students' struggle against tuition fee hikes from a broader challenge to the austerity programs of the Quebec Liberal and federal Conservative governments, has not only failed. It has brought them into headlong conflict with the students they represent.

At the beginning of last month the student associations accepted a sellout agreement—subsequently overwhelmingly repudiated by students—that imposed the government's tuition fee increase in full and would have made them auxiliaries in the drive to slash university budgets. During this week's negotiations, they abandoned their call for the repeal of parts of Bill 78—legislation that sets a chilling precedent for restrictions on democratic rights across Canada and beyond—and accepted the Liberal government's reactionary fiscal parameters.

Ultimately, their differences with the government boiled down to how to package the tuition fee increases. Determined to make its reactionary “user pay” principle the new Quebec norm for public services, the government insisted that there be tuition fee increases in each year of a seven-year agreement. The student associations, in reply, proposed a two-year tuition-fee moratorium, to be paid through the elimination of a university tuition fee tax-credit, and agreed that in the five ensuing years (i.e. from September 2014 on) there should be annual increases of \$254 per year.

On the student groups' part, this formula is tied to their claim—explicit, in the case of FECQ or FEUQ, or implicit in the case of CLASSE—that the youth have an interest in seeing the Liberals replaced at the next election by the Parti Québécois (PQ). In fact, the PQ is a big-business party, as tried and true an instrument of bourgeois rule as Quebec Premier Jean Charest and his Liberals or Canadian Prime Minister Harper and his Conservatives. Indeed, precisely because of their ties to the union bureaucracy and illusions that the PQ is “closer to the people,” it has frequently served as a better tool for the ruling class in imposing its right-wing agenda.

The fight against the tuition fee increases and to defend education as a social right requires a turn to the working class—the only social force that has the power and whose interests as a class lie in the reorganization of economic life so as to make social needs, not profit, the animating principle.

Students will find their strongest allies among the workers of both French and English Canada, the US, and around the world. The austerity measures being implemented by the Charest Liberal government—social spending cuts, privatization, and regressive tax and user-

fee hikes—are part of a worldwide attack on the working class, aimed at destroying all that remains of the social gains won through the mass upheavals of the last century. Public health care and education, pensions, and collective bargaining rights are all under assault.

The federal Conservative and Ontario Liberal governments are implementing their own programs of sweeping austerity measures, including massive social spending cuts, a hike in the retirement age, and the gutting of jobless benefits. In Greece, Spain, and across Europe governments are dismantling public services, slashing the minimum wage, and removing all restraints on job cuts and speed-up. In the US, President Obama boasts about “reviving” the auto industry—that is making it profitable again for investors—by imposing draconian wage and benefit cuts, including dramatically lower wages for new hires.

This global attack is aimed at making the working class pay for the greatest crisis of global capitalism since the Great Depression of the 1930s. And as in the 1930s, the capitalist elite is turning to authoritarian methods of rule, to impose its agenda of austerity and war. Over the past year, Canada’s Conservative government has repeatedly used emergency legislation to break anti-concession strikes, including by Air Canada, Canada Post and, this past week, Canadian Pacific railway workers.

A turn to the working class means making the student strike the catalyst for the independent political mobilization of the working class in Quebec and across Canada and North America against all social spending, job, and wage cuts, as part of an expanding struggle of the world working class against capitalism.

It means assisting the workers in breaking free of the political and organizational stranglehold of the pro-capitalist trade unions. These organizations do not speak for or represent the working class. For decades they have suppressed the class struggle, imposing job cuts and contract concessions. When the presidents of Quebec’s three main labor federations joined with Charest in bullying and threatening student leaders into accepting last month’s sellout agreement, they were reprising a role they have played countless times over the past quarter-century.

The NDP, the party of the trade unions in English Canada, has openly worked for the defeat of the students, as part of its efforts to convince the Canadian ruling elite that it can supplant the federal Liberals as its “left” party of government. It has refused to support the student strike or denounce the draconian Bill 78. While declaring itself “neutral” in the battle between the students and the big business Liberal government, it facilitated the passage of the minority Ontario Liberal government’s sweeping austerity budget, abstaining on crucial budget votes.

The student strike has demonstrated that a struggle over any important social need or elementary democratic right brings youth and the working class into a frontal collision with the government, the state, its police and courts, and the entire capitalist social order. The working class faces a political struggle and the necessity of building a mass revolutionary socialist party to prosecute it.

The Socialist Equality Party fights for the formation of independent committees of students and workers to organize systematic defiance of Bill 78, fight for the development of a cross-Canada and international working class counter-offensive against employer concession demands and government austerity measures, and prepare working-class action to bring down the Charest Liberal and Harper Conservative governments.

These actions, vital as they are, can only serve to develop the unity, combativity, and strength of the working class if they are conceived of and organized as part of the struggle for the independent political mobilization of the working class to fight for workers’ governments and the socialist reorganization of society.

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