

# Quebec government scuttles talks to end 16-week student strike

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Quebec's Liberal government broke off negotiations with associations that represent the province's post-secondary students yesterday afternoon, saying talks aimed at ending the 16-week-long Quebec student strike had reached an "impasse."

The negotiations, which were in their fourth day, were convened by the government following its passage of an emergency law that effectively criminalizes the student strike and places draconian restrictions on the right to demonstrate over any issue, anywhere in Quebec. Since the adoption of Bill 78, some 1,500 students and their supporters have been arrested in Montreal, Quebec City, Sherbrooke, and Gatineau, most for the "crime" of demonstrating.

Speaking at a press conference convened shortly after Education Minister Michele Courchesne walked out of the talks, Quebec Premier Jean Charest claimed his government's door remains "open" for further negotiations. He added that its hope is that there will now "be a period of lull that allows everyone to reconsider their positions."

But just moments later, Charest lashed out at CLASSE (The Broader Coalition of the Association for Student-Union Solidarity), the student association that initiated the strike against government plans to hike university tuition fees by 82 percent. Government officials and the press have repeatedly sought to portray it as "extremist," even "violent."

Responding to CLASSE's announcement of a mass demonstration Saturday in response to the government's breaking off of the talks, Charest called the student association a "menace."

"Yes," said the premier, "these are people who threaten Quebecers," adding that his government will "never retreat before threats."

Earlier, student leaders accused the government of

refusing to consider their proposals for a two-year moratorium on university tuition fee hikes that would have been financed by eliminating a tuition fee tax credit.

CLASSE spokesman Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois, who on Tuesday evening praised Charest after he briefly joined the negotiations, said Education Minister Courchesne had acted "in bad faith from the beginning to the end." He said that she had told student leaders that she could not accept a moratorium for political reasons.

In truth, the leaders of the government-accredited student associations, CLASSE included, ceded to the government right down the line—just as they did in the tentative agreement they reached with the government last month, that was then rejected overwhelmingly by striking students.

They continued the negotiations for four days, although from the outset the government made clear that it was not prepared to discuss suspending or repealing any of Bill 78's draconian provisions.

Yesterday morning, the student associations announced as a "good will" gesture that they were asking the courts to put off a hearing relating to their challenge of the constitutionality of Bill 78.

Moreover, the student associations agreed on the very first day of the negotiations that they would negotiate within the "fiscal parameters" set by the big business Liberal government. These parameters included not only the government's public proclamation that any settlement not cost the government a penny. But even more importantly, they were predicated on the government's overall austerity agenda.

This agenda couples the continuation of years of tax reductions for big business and the rich with sweeping social spending cuts, privatization and increased user fees and regressive taxes.

The *Montreal Gazette* reported that one of those

advising student association negotiators had described the government's parameters—parameters the student associations agreed to work within—as “I give you a dollar, you give me back four quarters.”

Thus the common proposal submitted by all four province-wide student associations proposed that the government finance a two-year tuition freeze—to be followed by increases in excess of \$200 per year the next five years—by eliminating the tax credit for tuition fees.

Initially the government proposed to reduce the tuition increases by a paltry \$35 per year by reducing the value of the tax credit. Later it proposed reducing the tuition fee increase in the first year to \$100, but this was to be financed by much larger fee hikes in later years.

The government, however, was adamant that tuition fees must rise every year. It is determined that it should not be seen to be giving way, even if only temporarily, on a key part of its austerity program—the systematic introduction and expansion of the “user-pay” principle for public services. This principle is a key element in the social counter-revolution that is being carried out by big business governments at every level in Canada and around the world. As far as the bourgeoisie is concerned, any and all social rights must be abolished.

The student leaders are themselves fearful of the mass movement of social contestation of which they are now the ostensible leaders. Repeatedly they appealed to the government to work with them in defusing the social crisis. “What we want is an exit from the crisis,” declared FEUQ (Quebec Federation of University Students) President Martine Desjardins.

After Courchesne broke off the talks, they pleaded for her to return to the bargaining table.

The problem in their eyes was how to convince students, who have been fighting for a tuition freeze and for education to be recognized as a social right, to accept a “settlement” containing the lion's share of the government's planned tuition increases and whose implementation would begin this September.

The student association's call for a two-year moratorium is tied to their reactionary perspective that students can advance the struggle for access to education by supporting the big business Parti Quebecois at the next election, which must be held no

later than December 2013.

The government's torpedoing of the talks with the student associations underscores that Canada's ruling elite is determined to inflict a demonstrable defeat on the students, to intimidate all opponents of its austerity measures. Workers in Canada and across North America must come to the defence of the students and make their strike and the burgeoning opposition to Bill 78 the catalyst for the development of an independent political movement of the working class against all job, wage and social spending cuts.



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