

Union mouthpiece denounces Quebec student strike

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SPQ Libre (Trade Unionists and Progressives for a Free Quebec)—an organization that serves as a mouthpiece for the trade union bureaucracy—has issued an open letter voicing hostility to the Quebec student strike and the growing defiance of Bill 78 and promoting instead the return to power of the big business Parti Québécois (PQ).

As the letter—published last week in the Montreal daily *Le Devoir*—spells out, the unions’ greatest fear is that the four-month long student strike will become the catalyst for an independent movement of the working-class, directed in the first instance against the provincial Liberal government and its draconian Bill 78.

Entitled “To avoid [Premier Jean] Charest’s bear trap,” the open letter argues against defying the anti-democratic Bill 78 and expanding the strike. A “social” or general strike would, it declares, be a “colossal error.”

A non-recognized faction of the PQ, the SPQ Libre was set up by a group of retired trade union bureaucrats with the aim of perpetuating the lie that the PQ is a “progressive” alternative to the Liberals, under conditions where working-class electoral support for the PQ had hemorrhaged in the 2003 election and the party had fallen from power. With the unions’ slavish support, the PQ governments of Jacques Parizeau, Lucien Bouchard, and Bernard Landry (1994-2003) imposed the greatest social spending cuts in Quebec history, illegalized and broke a nurses’ strike that challenged its austerity agenda and slashed taxes on big business and the rich.

Last week’s open letter was written by SPQ Libre President Marc Laviolette, who headed the Confederation of National Trade Unions (CSN) from 1999 to 2002, and SPQ secretary Pierre Dubuc, who for years has published *l’Aut’journal*, a newspaper that serves as a publicity agent for the unions and their reactionary alliance with the PQ.

The SPQ Libre feigns support for the students, claiming their struggle “has created a completely new social and political dynamic.” But like PQ leader Pauline Marois, it insists that students and all Quebecers must obey Bill 78—legislation that criminalizes the student strike and places sweeping restrictions on the right to demonstrate anywhere in Quebec over any issue.

The unions, it need be recalled, denounced Bill 78 as legislation worthy of a police-state. But no sooner had it become law, than they announced they would obey it. That is to say, they have agreed to act as enforcers of the state suppression of the student strike, since Bill 78 legally compels teachers to assist the government in breaking the strike and the unions to do everything in their power to ensure compliance with the law.

Opposed to defiance of Bill 78, the unions have maintained a conspicuous and complicit silence on last week’s arrest of the lone Québec Solidaire member of the provincial legislature, Amir Khadir, along with 64 other people, for the “crime” of demonstrating without police permission.

SPQ Libre justifies its hostility to continuation of the student strike and working class action in support of the students by claiming that the Liberal government is seeking to goad students into defying Bill 78 so it can paint the Official Opposition PQ as violent and on that basis win re-election.

“Unfortunately,” declare Laviolette and Dubuc, “Jean Charest will find, from the students’ side, interlocutors ready to play in this film. We have all seen, on demonstrations, huge banners calling for a ‘social strike.’ But the launching of ‘social strike,’ at this point, would be a colossal error. It would have no other effect than to facilitate the re-election of the Liberals.”

According to the SPQ Libre leaders, protest demonstrations against the Charest government, at least those that conform with Bill 78, are permissible. “But one must beware not to fall into a trap. The struggle ... will play out on the electoral front.”

The argument advanced by SPQ Libre—and echoed in the Quebec Federation of Labour’s slogan of “After the streets, to the ballot box”—is fraudulent from beginning to end. Its transparent purpose is to prevent the emergence of a genuine working class challenge to the class war program being pursued by the entire ruling elite and all its political representatives.

The pro-Quebec independence PQ is no less an instrument of big business than the federalist Liberals. Indeed precisely because of its close ties to the unions and their propagation of the lie that the PQ is a “people’s party,” the latter has frequently proved more able than the Liberals to implement big business’ agenda.

Second, far from successfully manipulating events, the Charest government and the Canadian ruling elite as a whole have been shaken by the students’ tenacious struggle. The traditional mechanisms they have used to defeat and defuse challenges from below—state repression and the unions—have thus far proven inadequate. Students rebelled against the sellout agreement that the leaders of Quebec’s three major trade union federations and the government sought to foist on them at the beginning of last month. To the dismay of the government and the elite, Bill 78 did not “shock and awe” the students into submission, but rather galvanized opposition to the government, particularly within the working class.

If the students’ struggle nonetheless remains in grave danger of being defeated, it is because it has been restricted to a single-issue protest limited to Quebec, in which the issue of university tuition fees has been deliberately separated from a broader challenge to the austerity program of the Quebec Liberal and federal Conservative governments.

The ruling elite, on the other hand, is acutely conscious of the fact that the student strike is a challenge to its drive to make the working class pay for the global capitalist crisis and that any concession or perceived concession to the students could trigger an avalanche of social opposition. That is why it has been so determined to stamp out the students’ strike, resorting to an unprecedented campaign of police violence and a flagrantly anti-democratic law.

It is the pro-capitalist unions and the social-democratic NDP that are playing the pivotal role in preventing the student strike from becoming a catalyst for a working-class counter-offensive. They have systematically isolated the striking students, as part of their broader suppression of opposition to the Charest and Harper governments’ class war assault, including massive social spending cuts, the imposition of the “user pay principle” for public services, hiking the retirement age, slashing jobless benefits and using strikebreaking laws to impose employer concession demands.

Having failed to bully students into accepting a sellout agreement with the government, the Quebec unions are now proclaiming their adherence to Bill 78 and seeking to channel the youth behind the Quebec bourgeoisie’s traditional alternate party of government, the PQ. The NDP, the party of the unions in English Canada, has declared itself “neutral” in the confrontation between the Charest government and the students and failed to mouth a word of opposition to Bill 78—a silence that bespeaks consent.

The only force that has the power to advance and implement a program in opposition to that of big business is the working class. It is to this force that students should turn, fighting to make their strike the starting point for the development of a cross-Canada offensive against all cuts in social spending, job and wages and for the replacement of the Liberal and Conservative regimes in Quebec City and Ottawa with workers’ governments.

A turn to the working class means assisting workers in breaking free of the political and organizational hold of the unions and NDP and building new organizations of struggle, above all a revolutionary working class party armed with a socialist program.



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