

# Quebec student associations make appeal for fresh talks

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Little more than a month after the Quebec Liberal government passed Bill 78—a draconian law that effectively criminalizes the student strike—and almost two weeks after the government broke off another round of phony negotiations, the student associations are again appealing for talks.

This appeal is based on the claim that the students' fight for accessible post-secondary education can be reconciled with the Charest Liberal government's austerity program of social spending cuts and regressive tax hikes and its push to impose the "user-pay" principle for public services as a prelude to their outright privatization.

In fact, the militant struggle waged by the Quebec students has brought them into headlong conflict not just with the Liberal government, but with the entire Canadian ruling class, its courts and police. In a gesture that underscores the cross-Canada ruling class support for the Liberal government's attempt to stamp out the student strike through anti-democratic measures, the federal Conservative government has proposed that parliament pass a motion affirming support for Bill 78 in the face of criticism from the United Nation High Commissioner for Human Rights.

In the last round of negotiations, all three province-wide student associations, agreed to drop their demand that the government repeal or suspend sections of Bill 78 and accepted the lion's share of the university tuition fee hikes demanded by Premier Jean Charest and Education Minister Michelle Courchesne. But they balked at the government's demand that the tuition fee hikes begin this September, for fear that if they did they would face students' wrath. In early May, students massively rejected a sell-out agreement that the government had bullied student leaders into accepting with the help of the presidents of Quebec's three

principal labor federations.

On Monday FECQ (the Quebec Federation of College Students) held a press conference to urge the government to agree to mediation. "The mediator ... can permit both sides to arrive at a compromise acceptable to all," claimed FECQ President Elaine Laberge. Laberge observed that all the other student associations have already declared their support for mediation.

The FECQ proposal was strongly endorsed by the Quebec Federation of Labour, the province's largest union federation, which has repeatedly deplored the "social crisis" engendered by the student strike.

It did not take long for the government to dismiss FECQ's appeal. "It's not third parties that will decide for the duly-elected government of Quebec," a government spokesman told Radio-Canada.

The government is counting on the unions, the social-democratic NDP and other ostensible "left" forces to isolate the students, leaving them to face the draconian provisions of Bill 78 alone.

While denouncing Bill 78 as a grave threat to democratic rights, the unions have pledged to comply with the law, including provisions that stipulate they must do everything in their power to ensure teachers and other university and CEGEP (pre-university and technical) employees assist the government in breaking the student strike. In keeping with this stance, the unions have failed to condemn the arrest of Amir Khadir, the lone Quebec Solidaire legislator, for the "crime" of demonstrating without police permission.

As for the NDP, it has justified its refusal to even nominally support the students or oppose Bill 78 on the grounds that the clash between the students and the Liberal government is a "provincial matter."

In a further piece of subterfuge the NDP is claiming that they are staying "neutral" in the class confrontation

that has erupted in Quebec, so as to concentrate on the “fight against Harper”—a fight that consisted of the NDP joining with the other opposition parties in proposing amendments to the Conservative government’s “transformational” austerity budget that were all, given the government’s majority, doomed to defeat.

The quarantining within the boundaries of Quebec of the student strike and of the broad and largely working class movement that erupted in response to Bill 78 goes hand in hand with a concerted campaign on the part of the political establishment, the corporate media, the trade unions and the student associations to divert the militant, leftward-moving opposition movement into the ruling class-controlled channels of electoral politics.

*La presse*, the most influential Quebec daily, has repeatedly run editorials calling for elections to be held at the earliest opportunity. It clearly favors the return to power of the Liberal government and would invoke a new Liberal electoral mandate to claim any and all opposition to its austerity measures illegitimate and “undemocratic.” But *La presse*’s editors have made crystal clear that should the Official Opposition Parti Quebecois (PQ) be elected they have full confidence that it will implement the same austerity measures as the Liberals, with at most a few cosmetic changes. In making this argument *La presse* columnist Alain Dubuc noted, correctly, that PQ governments initiated the dismantling of the welfare state and between 1996 and 1998 carried out the greatest social spending cuts in Quebec history.

Significantly, while feigning opposition to Bill 78—PQ leader Pauline Marois has promised to repeal it—the PQ insists that, till then, the law must be obeyed and enforced.

The unions are, for their part, in the forefront of the bid of the political establishment to shackle the opposition to the big business Liberal government, behind its pro-Quebec independence twin, the PQ. The QFL has proclaimed its principal slogan “After the streets, to the ballot box.”

Quebec Solidaire, which touts itself as a “party of the streets and ballot box,” has meanwhile once again served notice that it is ready to form an electoral alliance with PQ.

FECQ and the Quebec Federation of University Students (FEUQ), both of which enjoy very close

relations with the unions, have all along promoted the PQ as an “ally” of the students. Last week, they urged students to rejoice in the PQ’s surprise victory in a by-election in a riding that the Liberals had held for more than half a century.

CLASSE (The Broader Coalition of the Association for Student-Union Solidarity), poses as a militant alternative to FECQ and FEUQ. But it shares their perspective of protesting to the establishment and has vehemently opposed making the students’ struggle the catalyst for an independent political movement of the working class against the Charest and Harper governments in opposition to all social spending, job and wage cuts. Rather than forthrightly exposing the PQ as a party of the bourgeoisie, CLASSE leaders, when they mention it at all, make at most mild criticisms.

And as events have demonstrated, like FECQ and FEUQ, CLASSE was ready to bargain with the government based on acceptance of Bill 78 and its fiscal parameters, that is within the budgetary constraints created by years of Liberal and PQ tax cuts to big business and the rich.

The students strike has roiled the ruling elite in Quebec and across Canada. But if it is not to be isolated and smothered it must become a means for mobilizing the working class in independent political struggle. Only the working class has the social power and interest as a class in establishing social rights and breaking the stranglehold that big business and its profit imperative hold over all socio-economic life.



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