

Quebec student strike:

“This is not only against the students, it is against the working population”

A WSWS reporting team
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Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* interviewed students and workers who participated in last Friday’s demonstration in Montreal in support of the four month-long Quebec student strike and against the provincial Liberal government

As part of a sweeping austerity program of social spending cuts and hikes in regressive taxes and user fees, the Liberals are raising university tuition fees by 82 percent. Shaken by students’ opposition to the tuition fee increase, the government last month adopted an emergency law (Bill 78) that criminalizes the student strike and places draconian restrictions on the right to demonstrate over any issue anywhere in Quebec. But thus far, as attested by the large turnout in Friday’s demonstrations in Montreal and Quebec City, the government has failed to break the strike.

For a full report on the demonstrations and the efforts of the unions, the petty bourgeois “left” Quebec Solidaire party, and the student associations to divert the student strike and the broader movement of social contestation it has engendered behind the big business official opposition party, the Parti Quebecois, see: “Massive demonstrations in support of Quebec’s striking students”.

“I am here to protest against the government, against the system we are living in, against the special law that takes away the liberty of people,” Jamal a 23-year-old worker told the WSWS.

“I am not a student, I’m a plumber. I joined the demonstrations after the government passed Bill 78. Before that I was against the cause of the students. There are not a high percentage of workers here but we have to stop this. Money is made in the province of Quebec but the money doesn’t go to the population. It

goes to the corporations.

“The government is cutting social programs that people need, [while] the corporations don’t pay taxes. This is not only against the students, it is against the working population.

“They want to make it like it is in the US. In the US everything is private. You have to pay to go to see the doctor. We don’t want that here. We are against this. We want the benefits to be for the people.”

Jamal said he had joined the demonstration because he wanted to see a “social strike,” which he interpreted as a general strike. “This is what we are trying to do.”

Antoine, a striking student, told the WSWS, “The mobilization is going to continue as we are seeing today. I think that the next step will come with the return to school [in August] as provided for in Bill 78. I have heard it said from a police source, that Montreal police are being specially sworn in to impose this law. Come August, they are going to hit us hard ... I don’t know where it will end.”

A second student told the WSWS, “In the beginning it was only about the students and against the tuition hike, but now it has become much larger.

“It should be a whole social change for the entire society, not only about the tuition hike and taxation, but a change for things involving the entire society, because we have a government that sees the whole of society like an enterprise to make money.

“The primary role of the government should be to improve the lives of the population. But they are only interested in their own interests.

“For the strike to be successful the students have to broaden it.”

While initially expressing support for the role the

unions have played in the strike, the student changed his position when it was pointed out that they are supporting the PQ, which carried out the greatest social spending cuts in Quebec history when it last held office.

“One of the things that really bothers me about the unions and the PQ is they are opportunists. You noticed that [PQ leader Pauline] Marois has taken off her *carré rouge* [red square—the symbol of the strike]. That action was so reactionary.”

Asked about the connection between the events in Quebec and opposition in Greece and across Europe against the brutal austerity measures being imposed there on the demand of the international banks and big business, Jonathan told the WSWS, “You come to realize that capitalism won’t be the system that functions till the end of time. The system is evolving, that’s what we are seeing, and surely into something else. How exactly it’s going to change, I don’t know.”

Geneviève and Cynthia, were determined to continue the strike despite the threat of police violence and the savage sanctions contained in Bill 78: “We should be in front of the universities in August to continue the strike. We can’t just allow the government and universities to get their way.” When asked about the need to make the student strike the catalyst for a working-class led movement against all the austerity measures of the Charest Liberal and federal Conservative governments they said, “I think it’s a good point, but we’re all still working through these issues.”

Jean-François explained that if the government was so determined to impose the tuition fee hike it is because it incarnates its “user pay” principle for public services. “In health care it has already started. From next year, we’ll pay a health care tax of \$200 per year. They’d like, at the end of each year, to count up the number of times you’ve visited the doctor and charge you for that.

Jean-François denounced Bill 78 as “repressive” and “arbitrary.” “But,” he observed, “there are other laws against workers. Nurses for example, it’s very complicated for them to mobilize. Very high fines. For some workers, it’s very hard to exercise their basic rights.”

While expressing skepticism in the claims that things would be better for students and working people under

a PQ government, he said “In the heads of people, we can say there isn’t any other party. They don’t want to look elsewhere.”

A young construction worker who observed the march on a brief break told the WSWS, he was for the student strike. “I’m a socialist,” he declared as he eagerly snatched a copy of “The way forward for the Quebec student strike”, the statement that Socialist Equality Party supporters distributed on the march.



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