

The way forward for the Quebec student strike

Socialist Equality Party
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The following statement will be distributed to students and workers participating in a mass rally on Friday, June 22. For a pdf version, click here.

The capitalist ruling elite in Quebec and across Canada has been shaken by the tenacity and militancy of the now four-month long student strike. And when the Charest Liberal government criminalized the strike with its draconian Bill 78, there was a groundswell of working-class opposition, with protests spreading to even remote mining and industrial centers.

Nevertheless the strike and the students' struggle to defend access to university education are in grave danger of being lost.

The movement against the Charest government's 82 percent university tuition fee hike has brought students into headlong conflict not only with Quebec's current government, but with the entire Canadian ruling class—its media, police and courts.

Behind this ferocious response is the recognition of big business and its political representatives that the student strike constitutes an implicit challenge to its drive to place the full burden of the global capitalist crisis on working people. In every country, from Greece and Spain to the United States and Canada, the corporate and financial elite has set out to destroy the remaining social rights won by the working class through the convulsive struggles of the last century.

The attack on Quebec students coincides with Harper's "transformational" budget, which targets public health care, pensions and unemployment insurance.

If students are to prevail in the struggle for education to be a social right, their implicit challenge to the ruling class' austerity agenda must become explicit. The student strike must become the catalyst for the

mobilization of the working class in Quebec and across Canada in a political and industrial counter-offensive in opposition to all job and wage cuts and the dismantling of public services. The Quebec Liberal and federal Conservative governments must be driven out.

However, no confidence can be placed in the PQ, the NDP or any of the other parties of big business. The only way that social needs can take priority over the profits of the global banks and corporations is for the working class to take political power in its own hands and carry out the socialist reorganization of society.

No one should underestimate the determination of the ruling class to prevent the student strike from triggering an avalanche of working-class resistance. To defeat the student strike, it is mobilizing all the instruments and mechanisms of its class rule, from the repressive organs of the state to the pro-capitalist trade unions.

The Charest government has shut down the universities and CEGEPs for three months with the aim of dissipating the opposition movement and preparing a massive police mobilization come August. Efforts to intimidate opponents of the government and slander the students as violent continue to escalate, as with the massive police operation surrounding the Montreal Grand Prix and the arrest of Quebec Solidaire MNA Amir Khadir for the "crime" of demonstrating.

Above all the Charest government is counting on the official, establishment "left"—the unions, the NDP, and Quebec Solidaire itself—to politically and geographically isolate the student strike, to prevent it from triggering an independent movement of the working class and from spreading beyond the borders of Quebec.

The unions, as exemplified by the Quebec Federation of Labour's slogan "Après la rue, aux urnes" (After the streets, the ballot box), are seeking to suppress the

strike and divert the student movement into elections—that is into ruling-class controlled channels—and into a campaign to replace the hated Charest Liberals with a Parti Quebecois government. The Quebec elite’s alternate party of government, the PQ implemented the biggest social spending cuts in Quebec history and used a draconian law to criminalize and break a nurses’ strike, when it last held office. Like the unions, the PQ denounces Bill 78, but insists that it must be obeyed.

Many students and their supporters recognize that the strike is now at a crossroads and that the claim by CLASSE and the other student unions that the government would invariably bend before the protest has proven false. Given the Liberals’ intransigence, the student unions, including CLASSE, have already shown their willingness to accept tuition rises and are promoting illusions in the PQ.

Seeking to broaden their struggle and recognizing the connection between the tuition fee hikes and the bourgeoisie’s drive to dismantle public services as whole, many students have responded favorably to suggestions from CLASSE leaders that the way forward is a “social strike.”

But the “social strike”—as promoted by CLASSE under the influence of various anarchist groups—is conceived of merely as a larger protest aimed at pressuring Charest to negotiate, protests in which the working class will only be one of many elements. Moreover, in so far as CLASSE speaks about worker struggle, it is in the form of limited job actions, such as a one-day walkout, organized by the existing union apparatuses, not a rebellion against these pro-business organizations.

Notwithstanding the non-stop media campaign to divert the students from the workers, by depicting the former as “selfish” and the latter as inert and indifferent, there is great sympathy for the students in the working class, as was demonstrated by the explosion of opposition to Bill 78.

A turn to the working class means assisting the workers in breaking organizationally and politically from the unions, which for decades have acted as auxiliaries of the employers and defenders of “social peace.” It means developing an independent political movement based on a socialist program that articulates their needs as a class, the struggle for social equality

and the primacy of social rights over capitalist private profit.

The Socialist Equality Party calls for the formation of action committees, independent of the unions and the big business parties. These committees, controlled by rank-and-file workers, and based in the workplaces and neighborhoods, must mobilize in defense of the students and to fight all attacks on jobs, living standards and essential social programs.

The struggle must be expanded beyond the borders of Quebec through a struggle to unite working people across Canada and internationally in a common struggle against the economic and political dictatorship of the banks and major corporations.

What is needed above all is the fight to build a socialist party in the working class. The intransigence of the ruling class in its attack on every gain of workers must be met with an equal intransigence of the working class. But this means carrying the struggle through to its logical conclusion.

World capitalism is in a state of advanced decay. The crisis that erupted in 2008 is now entering a new phase. The response of the ruling class to the crisis of its system is to carry through a social counterrevolution aimed at eliminating every social gain won by the working class through bitter struggles.

Capitalism must be replaced by socialism. This requires that the working class—in Canada, the United States, and throughout the world—take political power in its own hands, establish a workers’ government, and reorganize economic life on the basis of social equality and the democratic control over the wealth created by working people. Only in this way can the right to public education be secured.



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