

The Quebec Student Strike and the global struggle to defend education

ISSE

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For nearly five months, students in the Canadian province of Quebec have been waging a courageous struggle to oppose the government's drive to increase tuition rates by 82 percent. The province-wide strike by university and junior college (CEGEP) students has won popular support and triggered solidarity demonstrations in dozens of cities throughout Quebec.

The Quebec students have defied the anti-democratic Bill 78 that seeks to criminalize protests over any issue. The Liberal government of Jean Charest has responded with a police crackdown and the arrest of hundreds of students. The government is now preparing even greater repression to break the strike as the mid-August deadline approaches for the resumption of classes.

The battle in Quebec is part of a growing resistance against the assault on public education around the world. In recent days, tens of thousands of students have been engaged in protests in Mexico and Chile against cuts to education funding. In Britain last year, hundreds of thousands marched against the doubling of student fees. In the US, students in California, New York, and other states have staged mass protests.

In every country, the corporate and financial elite is seeking to turn the clock backwards and return society to the dark days when only the sons and daughters of the wealthy had access to public and higher education. Nothing exposes the failure of the capitalist system more than its inability to provide young people with an education and a secure future.

In the media there are increasing references to the "lost generation" as unemployment for youth in Greece and Spain exceeds 50 percent and young people of all

educational levels around the world face little or no prospects for a future. In the US half of all college graduates are jobless or forced to work low-paid jobs to pay off their student loans. Schools are being closed, teachers being laid off and public education increasingly subordinated to the drive for profit.

In the US, a prominent business school professor recently proposed that college students enter into binding agreements with private investors to finance their education. In turn students would be bound to pay venture capitalists a portion of their future earnings like indentured servants.

The destruction of public education is part of a broader attack on every gain wrenched from the ruling class over more than a century of struggle by the working class. Throughout every region of the world health care, retirement benefits, and other essential social services are being slashed to the bone. Whether it is Charest, Obama or Hollande, the refrain is the same: "there is no money" for essential services or a decent standard of living.

This is a lie. Trillions have been found to bail out the global banks, boost the profits of the major corporations and fund war machines. Since the Wall Street crash of 2008, capitalist governments around the world have engineered the greatest transfer of wealth from the bottom to the top in world history. Today, the richest .002 percent of the world's population controls combined wealth that is equivalent to the annual Gross Domestic Product of the world.

Quebec students have insisted that education is a social right. But the fight to secure this right places

them in a conflict with the entire economic and political system. If capitalism cannot guarantee the right to a future for young people or a decent standard of living for the workers who produce society's wealth it should be done away with.

The only social force capable of carrying out this revolutionary transformation and reorganizing economic life on the basis of human need, not private profit, is the working class. That is why from the onset of the struggle, the entire political and propaganda resources of the ruling class has been mobilized to cordon students from the working class. What big business and its political servants fear most is that the student strike will become a catalyst for a broader movement of workers against the savage austerity measures of the Charest and Harper governments.

Students have been constantly told that workers are indifferent or even hostile to their struggle. Nothing can be further from the truth. The mass demonstrations that followed the passage of Bill 78 showed that millions of workers see the assault on the students as an attack on the entire working class.

But the trade unions are opposed to a struggle against the profit system and the big business parties. Long functioning as a labor police force for the corporations and the government, the unions have rejected any "social strike" to defend the students. Instead they have ordered their members to abide by Bill 78. Meanwhile, the unions support the election of the Parti Quebecois based on the lie that this capitalist party is an alternative to the Liberals. When it was in power, however, the PQ carried out savage attacks on social services and striking workers.

A turn by students to the working class means a struggle to help workers break free from the control of these pro-corporate unions and big business parties. It means a fight to mobilize the independent industrial and political strength of the working class.

The movement to defend public education can only go forward if it becomes a movement of the working class as a whole, and is merged with the demands for jobs, decent wages, health care, and retirement benefits.

Students should fight to draw the connection between their struggle and the attack on the working class as a whole.

The experience of the last several months has exposed the bankruptcy of the perspective of the Quebec student unions, including CLASSE, which have sought to limit the struggle to students alone and accepted the framework of Quebec nationalism and the profit system. Their claims that ever-bigger protests would force Charest to relent have been proven false.

With the mid-August deadline for resuming classes approaching, there is a growing recognition among students that they cannot fight this battle alone. Students must reject Quebec nationalism and turn to the working class throughout Canada, as well as in the US and internationally.

The struggle to defend education can only go forward as the fight for socialism; that is, for taking the banks and corporations out of the hands of the ruling class and running them democratically. The defense of the social rights of workers and students can only be achieved on the basis of the fight for social equality, ending the economic dictatorship of the banks and carrying out a rational allocation of society's resources.

The International Students for Social Equality fights for this program. We urge all students and young people sincerely devoted to defending public education to join the ISSE and take up the fight for socialism.



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