

Parti Québécois distances itself from student strike to reassure big business

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Parti Québécois leader Pauline Marois recently shed her “red square,” the symbol of the five-month-long strike Quebec students have mounted against the provincial Liberal government’s plan to raise university tuition fees by 82 percent.

For months, Marois and most of the PQ Members of the National Assembly (MNAs) had worn the square to show their party’s “support” for the striking students. Once Marois removed her square, all the PQ MNAs quickly followed suit and the party removed the symbol from the official logo on its web page.

“I no longer bear the red square,” announced Marois. “But we will continue to wear the student cause without reservation.”

A big business pro-Quebec independence party, the PQ took advantage of Quebec’s June 24 national holiday to highlight its move. It declared that it would henceforth promote the “*fleur de lysée*”—which was adopted as Quebec’s national flag by the arch right-wing premier Maurice Duplessis in the 1940s—so as to “return to what brings our people together, our nationalist project” and to “prepare for the upcoming election.”

By abandoning the red square, Marois and her party are seeking to dissociate themselves from the student strike and the opposition to Bill 78, the emergency law that criminalizes the strike and places draconian restrictions on the right to demonstrate over any issue. With elections in the offing and polls showing the official opposition PQ poised to win a plurality of seats, the PQ wants to reassure big business that it constitutes a “responsible” alternative to Jean Charest’s Liberals and can be counted on to press forward with austerity measures.

Only six months ago the PQ was trailing badly in the polls and, after suffering the defection of half a dozen

MNAs, speculation was rife that the PQ could be reduced to third-party status in the next election, which must be held by December 2013.

By posing as a supporter of the students, the PQ was cynically trying to drum up electoral support and obscure its own right-wing record. When the PQ last held office between 1994 and 2003, it imposed the greatest social spending cuts in Quebec history, then lavished tax cuts on big business and the rich.

The Charest government, with the support of much of the corporate media, has denounced the student strike as violent, declaring the red square a symbol of vandalism and violence. This smear campaign included Charest and other cabinet ministers accusing the PQ of being complicit in violence because Marois was wearing the red square.

In a bid to win ruling class support in the coming election, Charest and his Liberals are casting themselves as the party of “law and order” and a party that will not shrink from taking “difficult and unpopular” measures.

After Marois had demonstrably distanced the PQ from the student strike, the Quebec College Students Federation (FECQ) and the Quebec University Students Federation (FEUQ), both of which have longstanding ties to the PQ and to the trade union bureaucracy, reaffirmed their support for the PQ. FECQ President Eliane Laberge said, “We thank the Parti Québécois for the support they have given us during this campaign [the student strike].”

The unions, for their part, are pressuring the students to end the strike and seeking to channel the opposition movement behind the PQ—a right-wing perspective exemplified by the Quebec Federation of Labour’s slogan, “After the streets, to the ballot box.”

The spokesman for CLASSE (The Broader Coalition

of the Association for Student-Union Solidarity), the student association that initiated the strike, was somewhat more critical. “We can’t hide our disappointment when we see a political party who proudly wore the student symbol remove it,” said Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois. But he then signaled confidence in Pauline Marois and the PQ, adding, “I think that it is always possible that it gets put back on.”

Although CLASSE presents itself as a nonpartisan organization of struggle, it implicitly supports the PQ by refusing to condemn it for the pro-business measures it took while in power, and by mounting, along with the other student associations, a campaign directed exclusively against the Liberals.

Marois justified her abandonment of the red square with the claim that Quebecers have already received her “clear, unequivocal message” regarding the tuition fee increases. In fact, the PQ has repeatedly changed its position on the tuition fee hikes and is now committed to convening an “Estates-General on Education” where “everything will be on the table.”

The PQ opposed passage of Bill 78 and claims it will repeal it on taking office, but no sooner was the bill proclaimed law than it announced, as did its union allies, that the law must be obeyed. In other words, it supports the state suppression of the student strike.

When Québec Solidaire MNA Amir Khadir was arrested for the “crime” of demonstrating, Marois supported his arrest

The PQ has a long and sordid history of using Bill 78-type emergency laws to break strikes and impose wage cuts and other concessions—from the 1982-83 decrees that rewrote the collective agreements of 350,000 public sector workers to the 1999 law it used to force striking nurses back to work when they rebelled against brutal budget cuts.

To woo students, Marois boasts that the PQ froze university tuitions “even at the time of the zero deficits” (1996-2003). The reality is that the PQ maintained a tuition freeze while slashing public services and eliminating tens of thousands of jobs in the education and health care sectors.

The PQ’s right-wing nature is also revealed by the fact that supporters of the Liberal government’s hard line against the students include many of Marois’ fellow ministers in the last PQ government, including former premier Lucien Bouchard, Joseph Facal, and the

head of the new right-wing Coalition Avenir Québec party, François Legault.

Gilles Duceppe, the former leader of the Bloc Québécois—the sister party of the PQ at the federal level—has repeatedly denounced CLASSE as a “radical” organization and urged the government to exclude it from negotiations.



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