

Quebec students seek to broaden strike, but CLASSE leaders capitulate to union opposition

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Tens of thousands of striking students and their supporters marched through downtown Montreal Sunday in a demonstration called by CLASSE, the student association that has spearheaded the five-month strike against the Quebec Liberal government's plan to drastically raise university tuition fees.

Held in blazing heat in the middle of the traditional summer vacation period, the boisterous demonstration attested to students' determination to fight for education to be a social right and the depth of popular anger against the Charest Liberal government.

But the leadership of CLASSE offered no viable perspective for carrying forward the struggle under conditions where the strike has brought students into headlong conflict not only with Liberal government of Jean Charest, but with the entire Canadian ruling class, its courts and police.

CLASSE's leadership claims to support a "social strike"—a larger protest movement involving limited worker job-action. But in the face of fierce opposition from the trade unions, it has for all intents and purposes abandoned its call for any broadening of the strike. Participants in Sunday's demonstration were greeted with CLASSE's standard protest refrain, "Shout louder, so no one can ignore us."

Its attempt to pressure the government into withdrawing the tuition fee hikes having clearly failed, CLASSE is increasingly adapting to the union-led campaign to divert the student strike and the broader opposition movement that erupted in response to the Liberals' draconian Bill 78 behind a campaign to elect the big business Parti Quebecois (PQ). In recent weeks, CLASSE spokesmen have repeatedly indicated that they would view the defeat of Charest's Liberals at the hands of the PQ—a party which when at last held office imposed the greatest social

spending cuts in Quebec history—as a positive outcome for students and working people.

Speaking at the conclusion of Sunday's march, which culminated in front of Charest's Montreal office, CLASSE spokesman Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois, declared, "We are hundreds of thousands who dream of a better Quebec. We are hundreds of thousands who are determined to be rid of Jean Charest, rid of the Liberals, and rid of neo-liberalism. We are hundreds of thousands who want to give back the country to its people."

As was the case at the June 22 demonstrations in Montreal and Quebec City, CLASSE speakers made no mention whatsoever of a "social strike." Nor did they clearly call for the student strike to continue when the three-month government-imposed "suspension" of the winter semester ends in mid-August.

CLASSE speakers pledged to support students should they choose to defy Bill 78 and organize picketing of strike-bound universities and CEGEPs (pre-university and technical colleges). They made no recommendation, however, as to what students should do when the government tries to resume the winter semester.

This is in keeping with a decision CLASSE took at its July 14 congress that it would be more "democratic" to "leave it to students," organized in their local student associations, to initiate the next steps in the struggle.

The unions, meanwhile, have declared that they will obey Bill 78. This makes them nothing less than accomplices in the state suppression of the strike, since Bill 78 legally compels them to assist the government in forcing teachers and other university and CEGEP employees to break the strike.

As for the government, it is an open secret that it is using the lengthy suspension in the school term to prepare an unprecedented police mobilization.

Many workers participated in Sunday's demonstration, but they did so as individuals. Apart from a bus-load of United Steelworker members from Toronto, there were no union delegations whatsoever.

Yet even as the unions isolate the students' struggle and pledge to enforce Bill 78, CLASSE's leadership continues to promote them as allies of the students and the legitimate representatives of the working class.

Sunday's demonstration was held under the theme "Out with the neo-liberals." Many students and their supporters welcomed this, for they saw it as a broadening of the strike, with the struggle against the tuition fee hikes tied to a wider opposition to the ruling elite's drive to dismantle public services through social spending cuts, user-fees, and privatization.

But this slogan clearly had a double-meaning which dovetails with the identification of the Charest Liberals as students' principal enemy. Even more importantly, it is tied to the bankrupt reformist conception that the dominance of "neo-liberal ideology" is the result simply of greed—that the class war of recent decades is a bad policy choice not the outcome of the failure of capitalism; and that through protest the ruling class can be pressured into restoring the limited concessions it made to working people during the post-Second World War boom.

In line with this protest orientation, CLASSE continues to confine the struggle within the parameters of Quebec, depicting it as a "nationalist" struggle of the Quebec people, rather than part of a growing working-class led opposition to the drive of big business and its political representatives to make the working class pay for the capitalist crisis.

Only one of the three CLASSE speakers who addressed the crowd at the beginning of the demonstration made any reference to the brutal austerity measures being imposed by Canada's Conservative government. None spoke of the growing working class resistance in Greece, Spain and around the world to the class war policies of the financial aristocracy, nor made any mention of the greatest crisis of capitalism since the Great Depression.

The CLASSE speakers also made no mention of the PQ, a party that precisely because of the support it receives from the unions and residual popular illusions that it is a "lesser evil" has frequently proven better able than the Liberals to impose sweeping attacks on the working class.

FECQ and FEUQ, Quebec's other major student associations, have, along with their mentors in the union officialdom, long touted the PQ as an ally of the students. Prior to Sunday's demonstration, FECQ and FEUQ

leaders held a press conference to promote their call for students to focus their efforts on defeating the 10 sitting Liberal legislators who won their seats with the smallest pluralities.

"I think this movement woke a lot of young people up to the fact that we can affect changes," said FECQ President Elaine Laberge. "Before we were stuck in this vicious cycle where we wouldn't vote so we wouldn't be represented and because we weren't feeling represented we wouldn't vote."

While some FECQ and FEUQ leaders did join Sunday's protest, they did nothing to build it. This is because they are determined to adhere to the letter of Bill 78. In a show of defiance, CLASSE refused to submit to the police for prior approval the itinerary of the Montreal march and a parallel demonstration in Quebec City. Police declared both protests "illegal" at the outset, but with thousands marching, chose not to take any action.

Supporters of the Socialist Equality Party intervened in the Montreal demonstration to warn that students' courageous and tenacious five-month struggle is in peril and to fight for the relaunching of the student strike on a socialist perspective. They distributed more than 2,000 copies of a statement that read in part: "To prevail in their struggle, students must make their challenge to the ruling class's austerity agenda explicit. They must broaden their struggle politically and geographically by making it the catalyst for a working class counteroffensive in Quebec and across North America in defence of all jobs and public services, and for the development of an independent political movement of the working class directed at bringing to power workers' governments.

"Only the working class can break the stranglehold of big business over socioeconomic life by radically reorganizing the economy so as to make social need, not private profit, the animating principle."

To read the statement in full go to Quebec student strike at the crossroads .



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