

Middle-class protest politics or a socialist orientation to the working class: A critique of the politics of CLASSE

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The interview the *World Socialist Web Site* has published with CLASSE spokeswoman Jeanne Reynolds (See: “We have shaken Quebec’s government”) exemplifies the protest perspective championed by CLASSE’s leadership. It also sheds light on conceptions that are, to one degree or another, widely held among Quebec’s striking students.

Because of its militancy and anti-big business rhetoric, CLASSE has galvanized support from wide layers of young people. Under conditions where the trade unions, in the name of upholding “social peace,” have suppressed working class opposition to the big business assault on jobs and wages and the austerity programs of the Quebec Liberal and federal Conservative governments, CLASSE’s call for defiance of Bill 78 became a lightning rod for mounting popular anger, shaking the Charest government and the Canadian ruling elite as a whole.

That said, it must be recognized that much of what CLASSE’s leadership espouses is wrongheaded and in pivotal respects—above all, in its disdain for the working class—dangerously so.

When all is said and done, CLASSE’s perspective is not fundamentally different from that of FECQ and FEUQ, the student associations that are patronized by the trade union bureaucracy and openly promote the big business Parti Quebecois (PQ). Like FECQ and FEUQ, CLASSE’s politics are predicated on acceptance of the capitalist social order. It aims to pressure the government and establishment, albeit with louder and more emphatic protests.

Thus CLASSE spokeswoman Reynolds argues that if CLASSE succeeds in winning the support of the trade unions for a “social strike,” it may be possible to pressure the government into rescinding the tuition fee hikes and thereby establish that “our governments... are not there to rule for the banks and big companies, for the 1 percent, they’re there to govern for... the welfare of all.”

Reynolds is critical of the PQ and of those who argue that the strike should be ended so as to focus on replacing the Liberals with the PQ in the coming election—a perspective exemplified by the Quebec Federation of Labour’s slogan “After the streets, to the ballot box.” Nevertheless, she suggests that the election of the PQ could be a “short term solution” because it is less “hard-line” and more susceptible to pressure. She praises Quebec Solidaire, a pro-Quebec independence “left” party that has offered to form an electoral alliance with the PQ to defeat the “right.”

Reynolds claims that from the outset of the strike CLASSE sought to develop a broader movement against the austerity agenda of the Charest government, but the corporate media distorted and suppressed this message. Unquestionably, the media has lied systematically about the student strike, portraying the students’ fight for education to be recognized as a social right as a “selfish” attempt to “freeload” off others. Nevertheless, Reynolds’ claim is false, a mixture of self-deception and incomprehension.

Under the slogan, “When we mobilize en masse, *qu’on* win” (*mobilise en masse, on gagne*), CLASSE, in tandem with FECQ and FEUQ, deliberately separated the students’ struggle against the university tuition fee hikes from the fight against the Charest government’s program of social spending cuts and user-fees and regressive tax hikes. It made no attempt to mobilize the working class in Quebec, let alone the rest of the country.

In the face of the evident failure of this perspective, as exemplified by the government’s criminalization of the strike under Bill 78, CLASSE has raised the call for a “social strike.”

This call has resonated among students who recognize the need to broaden their struggle and that what is at issue goes far beyond the tuition fee hikes. But as Reynolds’ remarks illustrate, CLASSE conceives of the social strike as merely a bigger protest—one moreover organized by the trade unions—not a political general strike aimed at bringing down the Charest Liberal government and developing an independent, cross-Canada movement of the working class for a workers’ government.

Moreover, faced with the vehement opposition of the unions to any workers’ job action against the government, even a one-day protest strike, CLASSE has demonstrably failed to mount any campaign for a “social strike. It did not use the mass demonstrations held in Montreal and Quebec City on June 22 to promote the need for a social strike. Instead, CLASSE spokesman Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois told reporters that CLASSE’s priority was the defeat of the Liberal government, while voicing no criticism whatsoever of the PQ.

This path leads to betrayal, to CLASSE becoming an appendage of the trade unions and the political establishment as a whole in diverting the opposition to the Charest government’s austerity agenda behind the PQ—behind a party that when it last held office imposed, with the unions’ support, the greatest social spending cuts in Quebec history, and then used a Bill 78 type-law to break the 1999 nurses’ strike.

Already, in late May CLASSE joined with the other student associations in agreeing to negotiate within the government’s reactionary fiscal framework and in making a counteroffer that accepted the lion’s share of the tuition fee hikes.

In opposing the tuition fee hikes, students have come into a frontal collision not only with the Liberal government, but with the Canadian ruling class as a whole and its apparatus of state repression, the police and the courts. This is because the student strike is an implicit challenge to the drive of the bourgeoisie the world over to make working people pay for the greatest crisis of world capitalism since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

The right to an education will not be secured through pressuring the political establishment, but only by mobilizing the working class in the struggle for socialism. The working class is the only social force that has

the power to break big business' stranglehold over socio-economic life and whose interests as a class lie in the radical restructuring of society so as to make the fulfilling of social needs, not private profit, the animating principle.

But it is precisely on this seminal question—the emancipatory potential of the working class—that the perspective of CLASSE is so wanting and antithetical to the interests of working people.

Reynolds—and it need be noted that Ludvic Moquin-Beaudry, the CLASSE press attaché who accompanied her, held the same view—was dismissive of the possibility of winning working class support. According to Reynolds and Moquin-Beaudry, the working class, or at least large sections of it, has become “bourgeoisified,” buying into the consumer society and “the culture of the big car and the big house.”

“I don't think the working class in Quebec really has a tough time,” said Reynolds, who went on to caution that the notion of class struggle, at least as traditionally understood, is outdated. This after more than a quarter-century during which a one-sided class war has raged in all the major advanced capitalist countries, and when, due to the complicity of the unions and social democratic and Stalinist parties, the working class has suffered a massive decline in its social position.

Speaking of her hometown, the southwestern Quebec industrial city of Valleyfield, Reynolds herself noted the social destruction wrought by plant closures. Earlier, she observed that public-sector workers face draconian laws that threaten them with the loss of seniority if they walk out for even a few hours in support of the students.

The CLASSE leadership's disdain for the working class has been encouraged and cultivated by a whole array of political forces, including various “left” and anarchist tendencies.

The “displacing” of the working class has been the cutting edge of a campaign to deliberately sever democratic questions from the struggle for socialism—a campaign aimed at legitimizing an identity politics that serves to divide the working class, subordinate it to the political representatives of big business, and provide a “left” cover for the pursuit by privileged strata of their “piece of the capitalist pie” through affirmative action and, in the case of Quebec, chauvinist language laws and Quebec independence.

While the CLASSE leaders complain about the workers, the truth of the matter is that to date the striking students have not even begun to make a real appeal to the working class. Such an appeal would have to begin by making explicit the strike's implicit challenge to the bourgeoisie's austerity agenda and would necessitate exposing the real role the union officialdom has played in suppressing the strike.

The CLASSE leaders' disdain for the working class goes hand in hand with a parochial Quebec nationalist outlook. While CLASSE's leadership perceives itself as radical and has shown real courage in defying Bill 78, it has organized the strike wholly within the established political-constitutional framework and accepts instinctively the nationalist ideology of the Quebec elite.

While the ruling class across Canada has rallied around Charest, recognizing that its fundamental class interests are at stake, CLASSE has made no appeal to students, let alone workers, outside Quebec. As the student strike unfolded, the federal Conservative government tabled a savage austerity budget that cuts billions from social spending. Yet CLASSE leaders have, at most, made only the occasional reference to the Harper government. Nor have they challenged the NDP's spurious claim that it hasn't supported the student strike or denounced Bill 78 because the latter are provincial matters and it wants to concentrate on the fight against the federal Conservative government.

There is nothing progressive in Quebec nationalism. To say this is not to defend the Canadian ruling class' federal state or its Canadian nationalist ideology. The conflict between the federalist and pro-Quebec independence (or sovereignist) wings of the bourgeoisie has been used to

divide the working class in Quebec and across Canada and obscure the class divide—the reality that workers in all parts of the country, as around the world, face common problems.

Forty years ago the union bureaucracy succeeded in diverting a powerful working class upsurge in Quebec behind the big business PQ, with disastrous consequences for workers across Canada.

By confining the student strike and the militant opposition movement to which it has given rise to Quebec, CLASSE is strengthening the ruling class in Quebec and across Canada. Whether conscious of it or not, it is assisting the bourgeoisie in preventing the opposition movement in Quebec from sparking a working class challenge to the Harper government and preventing workers outside Quebec from coming to the support of the Quebec students.

Here again, the fault should not be laid principally at the feet of CLASSE. In Quebec Solidaire, all manner of pseudo-Marxists can be found who for decades have promoted the claim that Quebec *indépendantiste* nationalism is progressive. In the 1995 Quebec referendum, these forces supported the PQ's project for a capitalist Quebec Republic that would belong to NAFTA, NATO and NORAD.

The NDP and the Canadian Labour Congress, meanwhile, have a decades' long record of failing to come to the support of the struggles of the Quebec workers, promoting reactionary Canadian nationalism and defending the Canadian state. Their refusal to support the Quebec students—and in the case of the NDP, all but open support for their defeat—underscores their role in fostering the division between Quebecois and English-speaking workers.

Undoubtedly, many CLASSE leaders—Reynolds is just 20 years-old—know little of the source and social significance of their own political conceptions. That does not, however, make these conceptions any less dangerous.

In the final analysis, these conceptions articulate the dissatisfaction of privileged layers of the middle class that resent the redistribution of wealth and power in recent decades in favor of big business and the super-rich at the expense of smaller businesses and the administrators of the capitalist welfare state. Anxious for their own privileges, these layers are deeply hostile to any genuine challenge to capitalism, i.e., to an independent political movement of the working class. They promote nationalist and identity politics and are in the political orbit of parties like the PQ and the social democratic NDP and of the trade unions.

If the students' tenacious struggle against the Charest government's tuition fee hikes is not to be derailed and, no less importantly, if it is to make an enduring contribution to the struggle for social equality, it must become the catalyst for a cross-Canada mobilization of the working class to bring down the Charest Liberal and Harper Conservative governments and for developing a mass movement for a workers' government.

Students can play an important role in the fight for the working class to break politically and organizationally from the pro-capitalist unions and assert their own class interests and strength by building new organizations of struggle. Above all, this means participating in the fight to build a genuine revolutionary leadership—a revolutionary workers' party based on a socialist and internationalist program.



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