

Quebec student strike:

CLASSE manifesto promotes Quebec nationalism and protest politics

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In general assembly meetings this week and next, Quebec's striking students will decide how they will proceed when the province's post-secondary institutions resume the suspended winter term—under police gauntlet—later this month.

During the half-year-long strike, two opposed strategies have been advanced by the political forces that claim to support the students' struggle against the Liberal government's plans to dramatically hike university tuition fees and for education to be recognized as a social right.

From the beginning, the *World Socialist Web Site* has insisted that the strike constitutes an implicit challenge to the austerity agenda of the ruling class across Canada and around the world. Determined to make working people pay for the capitalist crisis, big business and its political representatives are seeking to destroy all the social gains the working class wrenched from them through the convulsive struggles of the last century.

The WSWWS has fought for students to turn to the working class, the only social force that has the power and whose class interests lie in breaking the stranglehold big business wields over socio-economic life. To prevail, the strike must become the catalyst for a cross-Canada offensive of the working class—French, English and immigrant—in defence of all jobs and public services and for workers' governments committed to reorganizing the economy on socialist lines, so as to make the fulfillment of social needs, not private profit, its animating principle.

The student associations, the trade unions, Québec Solidaire and the entire pseudo-left, have meanwhile insisted that the strike be limited to pressuring the Quebec elite.

For months, CLASSE, the student association leading the strike, maintained that the students' struggle should be waged as a single-issue protest. Opposition to the Liberals' tuition fee hikes was deliberately separated from any challenge to the provincial government's austerity agenda and from that of the federal Conservative government and the ruling elite as a whole.

This perspective has been decisively refuted by events. Far from negotiating, the Liberal government, egged on by the corporate media, has used unprecedented police violence and then Bill 78 to suppress the strike.

In the face of the government's intransigence and buoyed by the wave of popular, largely working class, opposition that erupted following the passage of Bill 78, CLASSE briefly advanced the call for of a broader struggle in the form of a "social strike." This, however, was not a call for a political general strike aimed at bringing

down Jean Charest's Liberal government and developing a mass movement for workers' governments in Ottawa and Quebec City. It was merely a proposal for a bigger protest movement.

Once the unions made clear their vehement opposition, CLASSE quickly dropped its "social strike" call. Increasingly, it has adapted to the drive of the trade unions and their allies in FECQ (the Quebec Colleges Students' Federation) and FEUQ (the Quebec University Students Federation) to divert the student strike behind the campaign to replace the Liberals with the Official Opposition Parti Québécois (PQ).

CLASSE leaders have repeatedly said Charest's defeat at the hands of the PQ—a big business, pro-Quebec independence party that carried out the greatest social spending cuts in Quebec history when it last held office—would be a positive outcome, if not an outright victory, for the students.

That CLASSE is becoming an auxiliary to the unions' betrayal of the strike is underscored by the manifesto it issued last month to outline its perspective for a broader struggle.

The manifesto bears the heavy imprint of the protest and nationalist politics of Quebec's pseudo-left, from the PQ's would-be electoral ally, Québec Solidaire, to the anarchists.

The CLASSE manifesto does not criticize, let alone indict the unions for their opposition to the social strike and their earlier efforts to impose a sellout entente on the students. It does not warn students and workers that the PQ is a big business party as dedicated as the Liberals and Harper's Conservatives to upholding the interests of the bourgeoisie.

It makes no call for support from students and workers in the rest of Canada. In fact, it makes no reference whatsoever to any issue, event, or development outside Quebec. Not to the greatest crisis of world capitalism since the Great Depression—the real driving force of the clash between the students and the Canadian elite. Not to the brutal austerity programs being imposed in Greece, Spain and across Europe and the mounting opposition they are meeting from the working class.

In opposition to the socialist perspective that students fuse their struggle with the Canadian and international working class' resistance to the assault of global capital, the CLASSE manifesto argues that the student strike has become and must go forward as a "peoples' struggle" to assert the "common good" against a Quebec government and elite who are allied with, and speak for, foreign interests.

"What began as a student strike," declares the CLASSE manifesto, "has become a people's struggle: the question of tuition fees has allowed us ... to speak of a much wider political problem."

But for CLASSE the “wider political problem” is not capitalism—the word is not mentioned once in its eight-page manifesto. It is “representative democracy” and “neo-liberalism.”

The manifesto points to the hypocrisy of the elite, which employs “emergency laws,” “riot sticks, pepper spray and tear gas,” “when the people voice their discontent” and which “betrays the principles it says it defends,” when it “feels threatened.” In opposition to the elite’s “vision, that they call representative,” CLASSE advocates “direct democracy”. An anarchist catchphrase, CLASSE defines “direct democracy” as a democracy “experienced every moment of every day,” “where democratic decisions arise from a shared space, where men and women are valued ... [and] can work together to build a society that is dedicated to the public good.”

This is an empty and pious wish. Empty because it is based on a rejection of the essential starting point of any scientific analysis of contemporary society and progressive program of social struggle—the recognition that society is divided into antagonistic social classes. Whatever the political forms, genuine democracy is impossible within the confines of a socio-economic order in which a tiny minority monopolizes the wealth.

In denouncing “neo-liberalism,” but not capitalism, CLASSE echoes a whole series of petty bourgeois forces intent on breathing life into the failed program of reforming or “humanizing” capitalism. They present the ruling elite’s rejection of the welfare-state policies it pursued during the post-Second World War boom as a bad policy choice rooted in greed, and not the conscious response of the bourgeoisie to the resurgence of the fundamental contradictions of capitalism—contradictions that in the first half of the 20th century led to two world wars, the Great Depression and fascism.

The CLASSE manifesto eschews the term working class and has all but nothing to say about its problems and struggles. The growth in social inequality and economic insecurity, the criminalization of workers’ struggles, and the employers’ never-ending drive to lower wages and speed-up production merit no mention.

Arguably the most striking feature of the CLASSE manifesto is its parochial, unabashedly Quebec nationalist viewpoint.

Unlike the unions and Québec Solidaire, CLASSE does not explicitly call for the creation of a capitalist République du Québec, but its support is implicit—implicit in its myopic Quebec focus, its nationalist rhetoric, its failure to oppose the PQ, its call for an education system that can serve “as the path to liberating a whole society ... and lay the foundation for self-determination,” and in its casting of the student strike as a democratic struggle of the Quebec people.

The manifesto opposes privatization and the Charest government’s scheme to exploit Quebec’s mineral wealth (le Plan Nord) in language akin to that employed by the Parti Québécois in the 1970s and a decade earlier by the Quebec Liberal Party when, in the name of making Quebecers “masters in our own house,” the latter nationalized Quebec’s hydro-electric industry.

In traditional Quebec nationalist style, CLASSE rails against a clique “of greedy persons” who cater “in colonial style” to the “whims” of “faraway stockholders,” selling off “our underground wealth” and sacrificing the “common good.”

Working people in Quebec have no interest in supporting the drive of a faction of the Quebec elite to carve out its own nation-state, where it will be the “master.” On the contrary, to assert their class interests, Quebec workers need to join forces with their class brothers and sisters across Canada, in the US and around the world.

Unemployment and deteriorating living standards, the dismantling of public services, rising university tuitions, an escalating attack on democratic rights, the threat of imperialist war—the problems of workers and youth in Quebec are fundamentally the same as those that confront working people the world over and will only be overcome through the development of an international industrial and political offensive of the working class for socialism.

Forty years ago, the trade union bureaucracy successfully harnessed a powerful movement of the Quebec working class that emerged as part of an international working class offensive, to the big business PQ, with disastrous consequences for the political development of the working class across North America.

Now under conditions of a systemic crisis of capitalism and a growing wave of mass struggles, from Egypt, Greece and Spain, to Wisconsin, the Quebec unions, Québec Solidaire, the rest of the pseudo-left, and now CLASSE are yet again trying to quarantine the struggles of Quebec workers and youth, and promoting nationalism and the PQ-led movement for Quebec independence.

Students and workers must spurn CLASSE’s nationalist-protest perspective. This path leads to the strike’s isolation and collapse in the face of the combined opposition of the state, the PQ, the trade unions and FECQ and FEUQ, and the transformation of the student movement into an adjunct of the bourgeois Quebec independence movement.

The right to an education and all the fundamental social rights of working people—to a job, a decent pensions, health care etc.—will only be secured through the development of a movement of the working class, based on a socialist internationalist program, in opposition to the capitalist social order. Students can play a vital role in the development of such a movement, in developing the revolutionary leadership that will politically prepare and lead the working class in breaking free of the pro-capitalist trade unions and articulating its class interests through the development of a mass revolutionary socialist party.

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