

Political lessons of the Quebec student strike

Keith Jones
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Only a few short weeks ago the Quebec student strike was shaking Canada's ruling elite and threatening to precipitate a political eruption of the working class. Now it is petering out, with students having failed to secure their immediate demand for a university tuition fee freeze, let alone their larger objective—recognition of education as a social right.

No one can reproach the students for insufficient militancy or determination. For months they braved an unprecedented campaign of police repression, including tear-gas and pepper-spray barrages and rubber bullets. During the course of the six-month-long strike, more than 3,000 students and supporters were arrested, the vast majority of them for the “crime” of demonstrating without police permission. To the dismay of the provincial Liberal government and the corporate media, students refused to be cowed by the criminalization of their strike with the adoption last May of the flagrantly antidemocratic Bill 78 (Law 12).

What then accounts for the strike's collapse?

The trade unions and the union- and Parti Quebecois-allied student associations (FECQ and FEUQ), have been all but openly campaigning for the strike's end for months. No sooner was Bill 78 passed than the unions announced they would comply with all its provisions, including those that legally compel them to ensure that teachers assist the government in breaking the strike.

In tandem with their efforts to break the strike, the unions, with FECQ and FEUQ in their trail, sought to divert students and the broader opposition movement that erupted against Bill 78 behind the Parti Quebecois (PQ). Quebec big business's alternate party of government, the PQ imposed the greatest social spending cuts in the province's history when it last held office.

But the unions and their student association allies are not alone culpable. The social democratic New Democratic Party (NDP), Quebec Solidaire, and the entire Quebec pseudo-left joined with them in politically suffocating and isolating the strike.

All were adamant that it be confined to a student protest

aimed at pressuring the Charest government and the Quebec elite. All opposed fusing the students' struggle with the growing movement of the Canadian and international working class against the drive of big business and its political representatives to make working people pay for the global capitalist crisis.

For months, CLASSE, the student group that initiated the strike, insisted on separating the issue of the tuition fee hikes from any challenge to the austerity programs of the Quebec Liberal and federal Conservative governments. Following the passage of Bill 78, CLASSE fleetingly spoke of the need for a “social strike,” a broader protest movement. But once the unions made clear their determination to prevent any worker job action, no matter how limited, CLASSE dropped its proposal like a hot potato.

Like any major social struggle, the Quebec student strike is rich in lessons—lessons of vital importance to young people and workers not just in Quebec and Canada, but around the world.

First, the Canadian ruling class, no less than its counterparts in the US, Europe and Japan, has responded to the eruption of the greatest crisis of capitalism since the Great Depression by launching a social counterrevolution.

CLASSE insisted that if students protested long and loud enough, the government would negotiate. But far from ceding to popular pressure, the Charest government, egged on by the corporate media and the Canadian ruling class as a whole, responded with escalating state repression.

Social rights—such as the right to an education, job or health care—will be secured only through a political struggle against the capitalist system, its political representatives, police and courts.

Second, only the working class has the social power to break the stranglehold the banks and big business wield over socioeconomic life. This requires the establishment of workers' governments committed to the socialist reorganization of the economy, so that fulfilling social needs, not enriching a narrow elite, becomes the

animating principle. But the mobilization of the working class to assert its fundamental class interests requires the building of new organizations of struggle, independent of and in opposition to the existing trade union apparatuses, which over the course of the past three decades have thoroughly integrated themselves into corporate management and the state.

The student strike has provided a further demonstration of the unions' perfidious role.

Canada's ruling elite was shaken by the students' defiance of Bill 78 and the support it galvanized within the working class. Just four days after Bill 78's adoption, more than 250,000 people demonstrated in Montreal, and in the days that followed thousands more joined spontaneous antigovernment protests across Quebec.

Recognizing that an attempt to apply the full sanctions of Bill 78 might provoke a situation akin to that which erupted in France in May-June 1968, the ruling class made a tactical shift. While holding the savage sanctions of Bill 78 in reserve, it chose to rely first and foremost on the unions and their political allies to undermine the strike.

This confidence was not misplaced. The Quebec Federation of Labour responded to the eruption of working-class opposition to Bill 78 by writing to the Canadian Labour Congress to demand that no support be given to striking students. A few days later, Quebec's largest labour federation adopted the slogan, "After the street, to the ballot box"—spearheading a campaign on the part of all the unions to harness the opposition to the right-wing Liberal government behind the PQ.

Third, the student strike has underscored the pivotal importance of the fight to build revolutionary leadership based on a socialist-internationalist perspective, in opposition to the various middle-class pseudo-left organizations that mouth radical phrases while upholding the authority of the unions and the bourgeoisie's "left" parties of government, promoting nationalism, and insisting on the unassailability of the capitalist order.

Many students turned to CLASSE believing it to be a fighting organization in opposition to the establishment-aligned FECQ and FEUQ. But CLASSE's nationalist-protest orientation was fundamentally no different. It opposed a turn to the working class, refused to criticize the unions for leaving students alone to confront the state, and adapted to the campaign to corral students behind the PQ. CLASSE spokespersons have repeatedly declared that the Liberals' defeat at the hands of the PQ would be a gain if not an outright victory for the students.

The politics of CLASSE have been heavily influenced by Quebec Solidaire (QS) and various anarchist groups. While the ruling elite has been working to suppress the student strike by diverting students behind the PQ, QS has been seeking to strike an alliance with this big-business party, first as an electoral ally and now as a junior partner in the event the PQ forms a minority government after the September 4 election.

In opposition to the struggle to mobilize the working class and free it from the political and organizational domination of the unions, the anarchists are the foremost proponents of "direct action"—individual confrontations with the police and symbolic occupations and blockades. Their blanket denunciations of all politics and parties only serve to block the struggle for the working class to separate itself from the parties of the ruling class and articulate a program for reorganizing society in the interests of working people.

The student strike has come up against the same essential political problems as the wave of workers' struggles that has rocked the world since 2011, from Egypt to Greece, Spain and Wisconsin. The struggles of the working class are being contained and suppressed by the unions, the ostensible "left" parties, and pseudo-radical organizations that act as their apologists and props. The Socialist Equality Party, its youth organization, the International Students for Social Equality, and the *World Socialist Web Site* are fighting to overcome the crisis of working-class leadership and develop the revolutionary leadership that will politically prepare and lead the working class in fighting for a workers' government and socialism.

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