

Quebec Liberals launch re-election bid with tirade against striking students

Keith Jones
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To no one's surprise, Quebec Premier Jean Charest yesterday called a provincial election for Tuesday, September 4.

Much of Charest's maiden campaign speech was given over to a virulent denunciation of the five month-long province-wide student strike.

Serving notice that he and his Liberal Party will mount an extreme right-wing campaign, Charest sought to paint his Liberal government as the bulwark of law and order against elements who, in the name of opposing university tuition fee hikes, are seeking to "challenge the established order and its democratic institutions, including the National Assembly and also the courts."

Charest claimed that the events of the past five months mean that "the September 4 election is not like others. We must decide what type of society we want to live in."

Repeating his own government's propaganda and that of the big business-controlled media, Charest said Quebec has been witness "to acts of intimidation, vandalism and violence."

"In the last few months, we have heard a lot from student leaders, from people on the streets, we've heard from those who've been hitting away at pots and pans. Now is the time for the silent majority to speak."

Unquestionably, the student strike has figured large in the timing of the Liberals' election call. The Liberals are determined to inflict a demonstrable defeat on the students so as to break popular resistance to their austerity agenda of social spending cuts, regressive tax and user fee increases, and privatization.

They intend to use the elections to provide a "democratic" cover for an unprecedented police mobilization when the "suspended" winter semester resumes in mid-August—a mobilization aimed at applying the draconian and flagrantly anti-democratic provisions of Bill 78 and smashing the student strike.

In this, the Liberals are counting on the open support of

the corporate media, which will claim that those opposed to the government should seek to defeat it at the polls not by striking in defiance of the law, and the tacit support of the trade unions. The latter have rejected appeals from CLASSE, the student association that has effectively led the strike, for a broadening of the opposition movement through limited worker job-action (a "social strike"). And the unions have repeatedly declared that they will obey Bill 78, including provisions that legally compel them to do everything in their power to force teachers to assist the government in breaking the student strike.

By placing their drive to ram through a dramatic increase in university tuition fees at the center of their re-election campaign, the Liberals are also making a transparent appeal for ruling class support, arguing that they are the best political vehicle for implementing its class war agenda.

Charest has repeatedly touted the government's refusal to bend before the students and readiness to run roughshod over democratic rights as proof that he and his government have the "courage" to take "difficult" and "unpopular" stands.

In his opening campaign address, Charest attacked Pauline Marois, the head of the Official Opposition Parti Quebécois (PQ), suggesting she and her party are unfit to govern because of their professed support for the students' strike. "Pauline Marois," declared Charest, "proposes a government that abdicates its responsibilities in the face of the street. Pauline Marois and the Parti Quebécois made the choice to embrace the movement of contestation, to wear its symbols and even to recruit a student leader (the ex-head of the establishment-aligned FECQ, Léo Bureau-Blouin) as a candidate. [Marois] proposes to give in, to concede, to give the students] everything they want."

The reality is the PQ is a rival big business party. When it last held office, between 1994 and 2003, the PQ

implemented the greatest social spending cuts in Quebec history and tax cuts that were skewed to benefit big business and the well-to-do. In recent years it has repeatedly attacked the Liberals from the right, for not cutting spending quickly enough and relying too much on tax increases to reduce the deficit.

As Charest on other occasions has noted, Mariois has repeatedly flip-flopped on the question of tuition fee increases. Her party's professed support for the student strike was a cynical maneuver aimed at boosting the PQ's electoral fortunes under conditions where it had been badly shaken by a series of defections and electoral reversals. (The PQ's sister party, the BQ, was all but wiped out in the May 2011 federal election.)

No less than the Liberals, the PQ is adamantly opposed to defiance of Bill 78, a stand that was underlined by its support for the arrest of Quebec Solidaire legislator Amir Khadir for the "crime" of participating in a demonstration in early June. Significantly, in launching the PQ's election campaign yesterday, Marois avoided any mention of the student strike or the Liberals' plan to nearly double tuition fees over the next seven years.

Hoping to capitalize on the unpopularity of the Charest Liberal government, the PQ intends to say as little as possible about the socio-economic agenda that it would pursue if elected. Instead it plans to focus its campaign on various corruption scandals, particularly the widespread evidence of collusion, bid-rigging and kickbacks in the construction industry.

While the PQ is committed to Quebec's secession, it will not make a major issue of independence during the election campaign, because it is far from enjoying majority support and because Marois recognizes that there is little enthusiasm within Quebec's ruling elite for a constitutional clash with Ottawa. The PQ will, however, raise the *issue identitaire*, attacking the Liberal government on chauvinist grounds for not doing enough to force immigrants to use French and accept "Quebec values" or to promote French as the language of work.

For decades, the unions have politically subordinated the working class to the big business PQ. Fearful of the growing radicalization in Quebec and the possibility that the student strike could become the catalyst for a wider movement of the working class in Quebec and across Canada, the union officialdom is clutching to the PQ more tightly than ever. Already in early June, Quebec's largest union body, the Quebec Federation of Labour, raised the slogan "After the streets, to the ballot box."

Two other parties, the Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ)

and Québec Solidaire, will be important factors in the election's outcome.

CAQ is a newly created right-wing party, formed by ex-PQ cabinet minister and multimillionaire businessman Francois Legault. It calls for the expansion of private health-care and the ripping up of teachers' seniority rights. It supported Bill 78, although it opposed the decision to suspend the winter semester, arguing the government should have immediately mobilized the power of the state to suppress the strike.

Although the CAQ gobbled up the right-wing populist ADQ, it is very much Legault's personal vehicle, with the leader personally choosing all the party's candidates. Last year polls placed the as of yet to be formally created CAQ well in the lead, but as electors have become more familiar with its program support for the CAQ has fizzled. Currently it has about 20 percent support in the polls.

Québec Solidaire (QS), which currently has one seat in the National Assembly, describes itself as a left, pro-Quebec independence, "citizens'" party and opponent of "neo-liberalism." An aspiring establishment party, it seeks to revive illusions in the project of creating an independent capitalist Quebec. It recently offered to form an electoral alliance with the PQ in the name of defeating the "right." But the PQ has rejected the proposal. It fears that association with the "radical" QS would undermine its efforts to convince the ruling class that it is better poised to push through austerity measures than the Liberals, precisely because of its close ties to the unions and residual popular illusions that it is a party of the "left."



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