

Parti Quebecois and unions press students to end strike

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On the second day of the Quebec election campaign, Parti Quebecois (PQ) leader Pauline Marois urged the province's post-secondary students to end their nearly six-month-long strike against the Liberal government's plans to dramatically increase university tuition fees.

Under the Liberals' draconian Bill 78—legislation that effectively criminalizes the strike—CEGEPs (pre-university and technical colleges) must resume the suspended winter 2012 term by August 17. Many students, however, are vowing to continue boycotting classes in defiance of Liberal government plans to suppress the strike using an unprecedented police mobilization and the punitive criminal sanctions contained in Bill 78.

The big business PQ has feigned support for the students in the hopes of capitalizing on popular animosity toward the nine-year-old Liberal government of Jean Charest. But it, no less than the Liberals, fears the political impact of a headlong confrontation between the striking students and the state. In the name of upholding "social peace," the unions, close allies of the PQ, have been working for months to isolate the students and corral them back to class.

In issuing her call for students to end the strike, Marois was flanked by Léo Bureau-Blouin, who was president of FECQ (the Quebec College Students Federation) until his term expired at the beginning of June. Bureau-Blouin was recently recruited by the PQ to be its candidate in Laval-des-Rapides, a suburban Montreal constituency.

Both Marois and Bureau-Blouin presented the PQ's call for an end to the strike as an "electoral truce" and sought to justify it with the claim that Liberal Premier Jean Charest is deliberately provoking a confrontation with the students so as to divert public attention from his government's record of corruption and mismanagement.

"We need to achieve a peaceful social climate," declared Bureau-Blouin. "That is why I support the idea

of a truce. We have to take all precautions not to play into the Liberals' hands."

The PQ is promising that within the first 100 days of taking office it will rescind Bill 78, withdraw the Liberal government's plan to increase tuition fees by 82 percent over the next seven years, and convene a "national" summit meeting to consider the financing and management of universities, tuition fees, student aid and debt, and student housing.

Marois said that at such a summit the PQ would advocate indexing tuition fees to inflation, but that the meeting, which would be dominated by university administrators and representatives of big business and the government, would be free to make any proposal it chooses as regards tuition fees.

The PQ claims to be a party of the "left," but has a decades-long record of anti-worker austerity measures and savage strikebreaking laws. And while it has criticized certain right-wing Liberal measures, including the tuition fee hike and the imposition of a new health care head-tax, it has also repeatedly denounced the government for not cutting spending and taxes fast enough.

In recent weeks Marois has boasted that even when the PQ government of Lucien Bouchard and Bernard Landry made eliminating the province's annual budget deficit its first priority it didn't raise university tuition fees.

But insofar as students were "spared" paying higher tuition, it was only at the expense of other vital social needs. Between 1996 and 1998, the PQ imposed the greatest social spending cuts in Quebec history.

The PQ has a long history of organizing tripartite "national" summits, with a view to securing the unions' collaboration in imposing the agenda of big business. The PQ's "zero-deficit" drive was politically prepared by precisely such a summit.

The PQ's opposition to the Bill 78 is no more genuine

than its claim to defend access to education. While it has promised to rescind Bill 78 if elected, it stands with the Liberals in demanding that Bill 78's anti-democratic provisions be obeyed in full till then.

The PQ's "truce call" is a part of a campaign uniting all sections of the establishment to suppress the student strike and the broader movement of social contestation to which it has given rise.

While the Liberals, egged on by much of the corporate media, denounce the students as "violent" and prepare to use the courts and police to break the strike, the PQ and above all the union bureaucrats pressure the students to end the strike, all the while posing as their "friends" and allies.

The unions have vehemently opposed the call of CLASSE, the student association that has led the strike, for a "social strike"—a broader protest movement involving limited worker-job action. And they have repeatedly pledged to obey Bill 78, including provisions that legally compel them to do everything in their power to ensure CEGEP and university teachers assist the government in breaking the strike.

In late May, at the very moment when hundreds of thousands had come out into the streets to oppose Bill 78 and the strike was threatening to precipitate a broader working class-led movement, the president of Quebec's largest union body, the Quebec Federation of Labour, wrote to the head of the Canadian Labour Congress to demand that no support be given to the striking students.

Subsequently, the QFL has tried to cover its tracks and claimed that QFL President Michel Arseneault's letter was misinterpreted. But in "clarifying" matters late last month, the QFL reiterated that it is opposed to all action in defiance of Bill 78 and all civil disobedience.

While actively preparing to assist the government in breaking the strike, through their compliance with Bill 78, the unions are seeking to politically divert the students and the broader opposition movement behind the campaign to replace the Charest Liberals with the PQ, the Quebec ruling elite's alternate party of government.

FECQ and its sister organization, FEUQ (the Quebec University Students Federation), are also working hand-in-glove with the PQ and the unions to end the strike. Both have repeatedly voiced their opposition to any defiance of Bill 78, going so far as to boycott CLASSE demonstrations that were not police approved. Moreover, for weeks they have been insisting that students should focus their efforts on defeating the Liberals at the ballot box—an all but open endorsement of the PQ.

FEUQ President Martine Desjardins said Thursday that her organization is "neutral" in respect to the PQ's call for a "truce," while quickly adding that she fears that should the strike continue it will "give munitions to the Liberals."

CLASSE has categorically rejected the PQ's call for an end to the student strike. "We won't end the mobilization till our demands have been met," declared a CLASSE spokesperson Thursday. But CLASSE has adapted to the unions' fierce opposition to making the student strike the spearhead of a wider movement in opposition to the austerity agenda of the ruling elite. It has completely dropped its call for a social strike, while making no substantive criticism of the unions. Indeed, following a meeting between CLASSE representatives and QFL President Arseneault, a CLASSE spokesman said they were convinced of the QFL leadership's good faith.

While critical of FECQ and FEUQ for their electoralist orientation, CLASSE has joined with them in claiming that the defeat of the Liberals at the polls would be a victory of students, thereby promoting illusions in the big-business PQ.

If the student strike is not to be suppressed through state violence or by harnessing it to the parties of the ruling class, or, what is most likely, through a combination of the two, students and their supporters must turn resolutely to the working class in Quebec and across Canada. In opposition to the pro-capitalist union apparatuses, the strike must become the catalyst for a working class counteroffensive against the austerity agenda being pursued by all the parties of the establishment, and for the development of an independent political movement of the working class armed with a socialist program.



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