

Quebec establishment united in drive to suppress student strike

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Quebec's entire political establishment, including the trade union bureaucracy, is united in seeking to suppress the six month-long Quebec student strike.

In recent days, the corporate media has expressed alarm over the fact that there appears to be a sizeable section of students who, despite Bill 78 (Law 12), want to continue the strike when the government-"suspended" winter term resumes later this month.

Passed in emergency session last May, Bill 78 effectively criminalizes the student strike. This includes banning all picketing within the vicinity of universities and CEGEPs (pre-university and technical colleges) and making it illegal for teachers to respect in anyway the student boycott of their classes.

The prospect of the strike continuing has compelled the political parties, who are now vying for votes in a provincial election slated for September. 4, to once again discuss their attitude to the strike against the governing Liberals' plans to raise university tuition fees by 82 percent over the next seven years

A major reason Premier Jean Charest called the elections was to provide a "democratic" fig leaf for the mobilization of the police and courts to impose the anti-democratic provisions of Bill 78.

On Wednesday, Charest reiterated his readiness to suppress the strike through state violence, declaring, "The special law is there and we expect it to be respected."

In this he was supported by the newly-created right-wing Coalition Avenir Quebec (CAQ). "I am ready to see everything done that is needed to be done" to ensure that any picket lines are removed, "and that we use police to do it," declared CAQ leader Francois Legault.

The Official Opposition Parti Quebecois (PQ) has

feigned supported for the students' cause. It voted against Bill 78, but quickly made clear that it believes the law should be obeyed, a position underlined by its support for the June arrest of the lone Quebec Solidaire legislator for the "crime" of demonstrating without police permission.

Anxious to reassure big business that the PQ can be trusted to implement its austerity agenda, PQ leader Pauline Marois has been increasingly vocal in demanding the strike be ended. Last week she called on students to declare a "truce" during the election campaign. This week she said she hopes that "100 percent of students would able to return to class" when the CEGEPs and universities reopen. Marois also declared her support for legislation to provide state-dictated rules, if not supervision, of student association strike votes.

The trade unions, which for decades have subordinated the working class to the big business PQ, and the two student associations that have long been under their political and influence, FECQ and FEUQ, are meanwhile trying to suppress the strike and to divert the opposition movement to which it has given rise behind the campaign to elect the PQ.

A key element in this reactionary campaign is the unions' efforts to isolate the striking students, leaving them alone to face the full brunt of the state.

The unions vehemently opposed the call of CLASSE, the student group that initiated the strike, for a "social strike," involving one of more days of worker job-action. They have also pledged to obey Bill 78, including provisions that legally compel them to do everything in their power to force teachers and other university and CEGEP personnel to help break the strike.

On Tuesday, under conditions where a significant

number of rank-and-file teachers had signaled their readiness to defy Bill 78 and respect student picket lines, the largest union representing CEGEP teachers, the Confederation of National Trade Unions-aligned FNEEQ, announced it had made a deal with the government to implement plans for compressed Winter and Fall 2012 semesters. In negotiating this deal while the strike was still underway, the FNEEQ leadership effectively scabbed on the students.

Premier Charest was quick to laud the FNEEQ deal as proof that the striking students are malcontents. "If we are capable of reaching agreement with union representatives," declared Charest, "we should normally be able to agree with everyone."

The leaders of FECQ and FEUQ have all but called for the strike to end and for students to focus on defeating the Liberals at the polls, an implicit call for support for the big business PQ. Leo Bureau-Blouin, FECQ's president till the beginning of June, is standing as a PQ candidate and joined Marois at the press conference where he called on the students to declare a "truce."

"The strike was only a tool but many students may now see that they can go back to school and finish the winter semester and focus on the election," declared FEUQ President Martine Desjardins this week. "Maybe they're starting to see we can obtain our goal without going on strike, that we have an opportunity with this election and we should try to profit from it and change the government."

The reality is the PQ is as much a political instrument of big business as Charest's Liberals and the federal Conservative government of Stephen Harper. When the PQ last held office it implemented the greatest social spending cuts in Quebec history.

Quebec Solidaire, which describes itself as a "left" pro-Quebec independence movement, initially called on students to obey Bill 78. Now it is saying that it neither counsels students to obey or defy Bill 78. QS co-leader Francoise David justified this stand, which amounts to back-hand support to the campaign to isolate the striking students, by declaring, "I don't want to give the students lessons." In the name of defeating the "right," the QS sought an electoral bloc with the PQ earlier this summer but was spurned.

CLASSE has itself adapted to the campaign to end the strike, although it continues to claim to support

defiance of Bill 78. It has refused to take an official position on whether the strike should be continued, has refused to criticize the unions for opposing a "social strike," and, in deference to them, has dropped the call for a broader mobilization. It has also lent support to the attempt to corral the students behind the PQ, saying the defeat of Charest would be a gain, if not an outright victory, for the students.

If the students' strike is not to be strangled through a combination of state suppression and pressure from the unions and other "left" sections of the establishment, students must turn to the working class in Quebec and across Canada armed with a socialist strategy.

The working class is the only social force that has the power to defeat the state suppression of the students' struggle through a general strike aimed at bringing down the Charest government and developing an independent political movement of the working class. And it is the only the working class, through the bringing to power of workers' government, that can reorganize socio-economic life so as to break the domination of big business and make the fulfillment of human needs, not the accumulation of private profit, its animating principle.



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