

A new policy is needed for Quebec student strike

Socialist Equality Party (Canada)
10 August 2012

In the face of a media vilification campaign, police violence and draconian anti-democratic legislation (Bill 78), students in Quebec have waged a determined and courageous six month-long struggle against the provincial Liberal government's plan to dramatically increase university tuition fees.

However, the students' struggle has now reached a point where critical questions of political perspective can no longer be ignored or sidestepped.

To end the strike would deliver a political victory to the Charest Liberal government and the entire ruling elite. This victory would be welcomed by the big business Parti Quebecois (PQ) as fervently as by Jean Charest and Stephen Harper, as has been made abundantly clear by PQ leader Pauline Marois' repeated calls for the strike to be ended and Bill 78 obeyed.

There is no evidence to support the claim made by the union officialdom and the leaders of the establishment-aligned student associations, FECQ and FEUQ, that ending the strike would assist in Charest's defeat at the hands of the PQ in the September 4 provincial election. But even were this true, what of it? The PQ is the Quebec bourgeoisie's alternate party of government. When it last held office it imposed the greatest social spending cuts in Quebec history, used a savage Bill 78-type law to break a nurses' strike, and slashed taxes for big business and the rich.

The PQ is the Quebec variant of the "left" parties of government present the world over, from the Democratic Party in the US to the Labour Party in Britain and the Socialist Party in France. Their function is to suppress and co-opt oppositional movements and work with the trade union bureaucracy to impose the agenda of the ruling class.

The strike should be continued. But it must be armed with a radically new perspective, if it is not to succumb in the

face of state repression and the maneuvers of the unions to isolate it and channel the opposition to the hated Liberal government of Charest behind the PQ.

This new perspective must be founded on the recognition that the students' strike is part of growing worldwide working class resistance to the drive of big business and its political representatives to make workers and youth pay for the greatest crisis of global capitalism since the Great Depression.

It is to the working class across Canada and internationally that students must now resolutely turn. The strike must become the catalyst for a working-class counteroffensive against the assault being implemented by big business and all its political representatives in the name of corporate competitiveness and austerity.

No one should underestimate the forces arraigned against the strike.

The Liberals, egged on by the corporate establishment, are preparing to suppress the strike using the police, courts and the draconian provisions of Bill 78.

A no less sinister role is being played by those who have posed as allies of the students, most importantly the trade unions. The unions in Quebec as around the world are not workers' organizations, but rather auxiliaries of big business and the state in policing the working class. In the name of "preserving social peace," the unions have been working for months to smother the strike. They joined with Charest in seeking to bully students into accepting a sellout agreement in early May. No sooner was Bill 78 adopted, than the unions pledged to enforce it, including making teachers assist the government in breaking the strike. They vehemently opposed CLASSE's call for a "social strike."

CLASSE has itself increasingly adapted to the drive of the

ruling class, its political parties, and the unions to end the strike. It has refused to criticize the unions for opposing a “social strike,” and in deference to them has dropped altogether the call for a broader mobilization. It has 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. And it has failed to officially fight for the strike’s continuation.

The strike’s fatal weakness has been its protest and nationalist orientation—its restriction to a protest campaign based on acceptance of the existing social-economic order, limited to pressuring the Charest government and Quebec’s elite, and confined to Quebec.

CLASSE claimed that if students boycotted classes and mounted demonstrations they could create a *rapport de force* (balance of power) in which the government would have no choice but to negotiate.

Instead students were met with state violence and found themselves in a headlong collision not just with the Quebec Liberal government, but with the entire Canadian ruling class, its courts and police.

This is an experience common to working people around the world. Under the impact of the capitalist crisis the ruling class is seeking to destroy all the social rights of the working class, from public services to collective bargaining, and answering the inevitable working class opposition with state repression.

The international working class is the only social force that has the power to break the stranglehold of big business over social-economic life and to secure the fundamental social rights of working people—including the rights to a decent education, job, pension, and health care. But to carry out this social transformation the working population must organize itself as an independent political force to establish workers’ governments. Then the economy can be radically reorganized so as to make social need, not private profit, the animating principle.

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, CLASSE issued a manifesto last month imbued with Quebec nationalism. The manifesto celebrates the student strike as a “democratic struggle” of the Quebec people, while omitting any mention of the working class or capitalism.

The ideology of the Quebec bourgeoisie, Quebec nationalism, like its twin Canadian nationalism, is used by the elite to harness the working class to its rule and divide the workers of Quebec from their true allies, workers in English Canada and around the world.

The CLASSE manifesto bears the heavy imprint of the influence of Quebec Solidaire (QS) and various anarchist groups.

QS is a member of the PQ-led *Conseil de la souveraineté du Québec* and a would-be electoral ally of the PQ. It promotes itself as “a party of the street and the ballot box,” that is a party orientated to pressuring and working with the establishment.

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 elite and articulate a program for reorganizing of society in the interests of working people.

The student strike has come up against the same problem as has the initial wave of worker struggles around the world. These struggles are being contained and suppressed by the unions, the ostensible “left” parties, and pseudo-radical organizations that promote nationalism and the authority of the unions and “left” parties.

The Socialist Equality Party, its youth organization, the International Students for Social Equality, and the *World Socialist Web Site* exist to overcome the crisis of working-class leadership, to develop the revolutionary leadership that will politically prepare and lead the working class in breaking free of the pro-capitalist trade unions and in fighting for a workers’ government and socialism.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact