

Quebec students debate whether to continue their strike

A WSWS reporting team
14 August 2012

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with striking Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM) students when they met last week to decide whether to continue participating in the six-month province-wide strike against the provincial Liberal government's plans to dramatically raise university tuition fees.

The meeting of UQAM Human Science Faculty students was part of a series of student assemblies being held across Quebec as the strike-hit university and CEGEPs (pre-university and technical colleges) prepare, under government order, to resume the "suspended" winter term. Under Bill 78 (Law 12), emergency legislation passed last May, the Liberal government imposed a three-month suspension of the winter term, while effectively criminalizing the strike and placing draconian restrictions on the right to demonstrate over any issue anywhere in Quebec.

The votes on whether to continue the strike are taking place in the midst of a provincial election campaign that was called by Liberal Premier Jean Charest at the beginning of August. Charest launched his campaign with a vicious denunciation of the students and is seeking to rally ruling-class support by presenting his party as the most ready and determined to use state repression in imposing big business's austerity agenda in the face of popular opposition. (See: "Quebec Liberals launch re-election bid with tirade against striking students")

The ruling elite's other traditional party of government, Pauline Marois' Parti Québécois, and the more establishment-aligned student associations, FECQ and FEUQ, are urging students to end the strike and channel their energy behind the election of a PQ government, on the false claim that the PQ is sympathetic to students' concerns.

In fact, when it last held office (1994-2003), the PQ,

imposed the steepest social spending cuts in Quebec history and eliminated tens of thousands of jobs in the education and health care sectors. This and the PQ's long record of adopting savage anti-worker laws have not stopped the trade unions, traditional PQ allies, and various parties and groups that claim to be "left," like Quebec Solidaire, from promoting the big business PQ as a "lesser evil."

The unions, it need be added, have been working to isolate and suppress the student strike for months. No sooner was Bill 78 adopted than they declared that they would obey it. Subsequently, they vigorously opposed a proposal from CLASSE, the student group that initiated the strike, for a broader protest movement involving limited job action, a "social strike."

The WSWS raised these questions with the UQAM students we interviewed. Several expressed hope the PQ would be "less bad" than the Liberals. Others were more critical, including a student who noted that "when Marois was Education Minister she carried out larger spending cuts than even the Charest government has."

"We of AFESH (Association of Students of the Human Sciences Faculty) have voted for an unlimited general strike till free education is granted or less than 100,000 students are on strike," explained Marilou Hébert, a UQAM sociology student. "This is a means to continue the strike today. We cannot vote to return to school."

"This isn't only a student struggle. It's a social struggle. Education is at the foundation of society, but there are few people who see it that way. Therefore, yes, we must be a social movement and not just a student movement."

"Teachers are as constrained as us by Bill 78. They are in a difficult position."

Jean-Sébastien shared her sentiments: "We at AFESH

will continue the strike. How will Bill 78 be applied? Will it be applied in all its severity? It is an act of *liberticide*, a liberty-killing law. Myself, I don't know what's going to happen with that, but I think we must stand firm.

"I imagine the unions have more of an electoral agenda. They would welcome the election of the PQ and for that to take place they need to have tranquil conditions. I don't think that they are ready to stir things up. The talk of a social strike was quickly dropped."

David Brassard told the WSWS, "It began as a student strike, but it has gone way beyond that.

"I don't think that the PQ is an alternative. We have a form of bipartisan politics in Quebec. For more than 40 years, we have had two right-wing parties.

"The CAQ [*Coalition Avenir Québec*] doesn't have a single candidate elected under its banner. It's the defunct [right-wing] ADQ. Yet CAQ occupies such a large place in the media. I cannot understand why the media give it such a large platform. At the same time there are political formations like Québec Solidaire and Option Nationale (a split-off from the PQ) that have interesting things to propose but they don't get talked about.

"The student strike is taking place in a global context. We see the same thing for example in the United States where there are demonstrations organized at CUNY to challenge the tuition fees. We also see in Greece people rising up against austerity. I saw people who were saying, 'This is not our austerity'.

"Globally, it's the awakening of a new generation. People say if Egypt was capable of getting rid of a dictator, we can too. It's not the same context, but perhaps we also can take to the streets and be heard."

Audrée, another UQAM student, said she considers the student strike "more pertinent than ever."

"I don't at all think that elections will solve anything, no matter the result. I have the impression that this struggle can only be won by mobilization at the base.

"I don't think that it is a political party that will deliver us what we want. It is us— citizens, students, workers, unemployed, men and women, who will bring it about."

Speaking of the unions support for the PQ, Audrée said, "There has been some exploitation of our struggle on the part of the unions. They wanted to act as if they

were our allies. But I don't think the big trade union federations are for combative unionism (*syndicalisme de combat*.) They are too tied to the political class.

"If you want to speak about democracy, we can be inspired by the workers' movements of the past, but not by contemporary union movements. Perhaps CLASSE is different, but one must remain critical.

"Anarchism has a place in CLASSE and I'm happy that there is that sort of thinking. I think it is important that there is a diversity of ways of looking at things, a diversity of tactics. I don't think that we should diabolize any tendency apart from neoliberalism."

The authors also recommend:

A new policy is needed for Quebec student strike
[10 August 2012]

CLASSE manifesto promotes Quebec nationalism and protest politics
[8 August 2012]



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