

Quebec student strike votes produce mixed results

Keith Jones
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Thousands of Quebec students are voting this week on whether to continue their six month-long strike, under conditions where the trade unions have systematically isolated the students and left them to face the harsh criminal sanctions of Bill 78 (Law 12) alone.

The voting to date has produced mixed results. Students at two major CEGEPs (pre-university and technical colleges), CEGEP-du-Vieux- Montréal and CEGEP St. Laurent, voted narrowly to continue the strike. So also did students at one of the major faculties of the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM). But with students at more than a half-dozen other CEGEPs in the Montreal-area, Valleyfield, and St. Jerome voting to return to class, there is a growing perception that the strike is fizzling out.

The vote results are not surprising, given the forces arrayed against the students and the failure of CLASSE, the student group that has led the strike, to articulate a strategy to mobilize the working class in support of the students. The strike would have to become the spearhead of a struggle against the austerity measures of the provincial Liberal and federal Conservative governments.

For weeks, Quebec's Liberal government has been vowing to mobilize the courts and police to enforce Bill 78's anti-democratic provisions. In calling a provincial election for Tuesday Sept. 4, Premier Jean Charest had a double-objective: to provide a "democratic" cover for his government's plans to use state repression to break the students' strike and to appeal to the ruling elite to rally behind his government as its most determined and ruthless political instrument in imposing austerity measures.

Meanwhile, the unions and the establishment-aligned student associations, FECQ and FEUQ, have been urging students to return to class and "carry forward their fight" by opposing the Liberals at the polls—that is, by supporting the election of the big business Parti Quebecois.

For weeks it has been clear that the student strike would face a pivotal turning point in mid-August when the strike-hit CEGEPs are legally compelled under Bill 78 to resume the government-suspended winter semester. Yet the leadership of CLASSE issued no call to workers in Quebec, let alone across Canada, to take action in support of the student strike. Once the unions made clear that they were vehemently opposed to a "social strike," CLASSE

shelved its call for a broader protest movement.

Only last Sunday did CLASSE's leadership issue a clear call for the strike to continue. But in doing so it elaborated no strategy to widen the struggle and to counter the efforts of the state and the unions to defeat the strike.

The Socialist Equality Party and its youth movement, the International Students for Social Equality, have intervened among the striking students to advance a socialist strategy. In recent days, SEP and ISSE members and supporters distributed a statement entitled "A new policy is needed for Quebec student strike." It reads in part:

"To end the strike would deliver a political victory to the Charest Liberal government and the entire ruling class. This victory would be welcomed by the big business Parti Quebecois as fervently as by 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. ... But [the strike] 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 counter offensive against the class war assault being implemented by big business and all its political representatives in the name of corporate competitiveness and austerity."

Many of the students who voted to end the strike did so reluctantly. This was exemplified by the decision of students at several CEGEPs to end the strike, but nonetheless walk out on August 22 so as to participate in a Quebec-wide demonstration against the Liberals' plan to raise university tuition fees by 82

percent over the next seven years.

Concern about legal penalties and the threat students' semester would be canceled if the strike continues have weighed heavily in the votes.

Illusions in the Parti Quebecois have also played a major role. Although the PQ implemented the greatest social spending cuts in Quebec history when it last held office and has come into headlong conflict with the working class whenever it has formed the government, the unions continue to promote it as a "progressive" party. In this they have been seconded by Quebec Solidaire (QS), an ostensibly "left" pro-Quebec independence party. In June QS proposed an electoral alliance with the PQ in the name of defeating the "right" and last weekend co-QS leader Francoise David said QS would welcome the opportunity to work with, i.e. prop up, a minority PQ government.

CLASSE has also promoted illusions in the PQ with its claim that the defeat of Charest's government at the hands of the Quebec elite's alternate party of government would be a gain for the student movement. This perspective was spelled out in a letter published in the Quebec nationalist daily *Le Devoir* last Thursday, announcing Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois' resignation as a spokesperson for CLASSE. "I leave with only one regret," wrote Nadeau-Dubois. "I regret that I am quitting my functions while Quebec is still led by Jean Charest, a premier who is contemptuous and violent toward Quebec and its youth."

CLASSE's best-known representative, Nadeau-Dubois was for months vilified by the press and Liberal cabinet ministers, including Charest, and targeted by death-threats. He has said his decision to return to being a simple CLASSE activist was motivated by personal exhaustion and has denied press reports that his resignation was prompted by differences within CLASSE over whether it should bow to the ruling class campaign to "suspend the strike" during the election campaign.

Wherever the truth lies, Nadeau-Dubois' personal exhaustion has undoubtedly been fed by the exhaustion of the protest perspective which he came to personify—the claim that if students were sufficiently mobilized the government and Quebec elite would have to listen to the student protest and negotiate.

Instead, Canada's elite, like big business around the world, responded to the opposition to its austerity program with repression, demonstrating thereby that the defence of the basic rights of working people must take the form of a political struggle for workers' governments and socialism.

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke with participants in Tuesday evening's student assembly and strike vote at CEGEP-du-Vieux- Montréal.

"Since the beginning, I have been against the tuition fee hike," said Valérie Côté. "The fact there is an election on September 4

could change things. Except I tell myself that it is almost six months that we have been on strike and I ask if we accept a two-week truce to later perhaps go back on strike would that not just be to lower our guard? I haven't put a stop to my studies for so important a struggle only to have nothing at the end.

"I am in agreement with the idea of appealing to the workers. I say that the state is there to respond to the needs of citizens and if the state doesn't even listen to the citizens then I ask myself if one has real democracy."

Gabriel told the WSWS "it is important to continue the strike. If we lower our arms the politicians, even those who have made promises like the PQ, will take notice and perhaps rethink their promises. I think we have to maintain pressure on these parties.

"The PQ is a party that that in the past has proposed unfreezing tuition fees. It could be very easy for them to revert back to be in favour of raising tuition fees if they see we are no longer mobilized."

Mathieu was also wary of the PQ, saying "we are not certain of its good faith because we have seen what the PQ's done in the past. Also its promise of an education summit is very vague. We are very far from having social measures like free tuition.

"The student movement," he continued, "has led to a larger social movement for more equality.

"The trade union federations are tied to the government. They don't really want to make too many waves for fear that they will lose their subsidies.

"There is a connection between the Charest government's education policy and what's going on in Europe—the capitalist system. There is a new crisis and they want to resolve it by punishing those who shouldn't be punished, the ordinary people."



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