Quebec CEGEP students end their strike

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Under the threat of state repression and heavy pressure from the trade unions and their political ally, the Parti Quebecois, students at the fourteen CEGEPs (pre-university and technical colleges) that have been on strike since last winter voted last week to return to class.

University student associations will hold similar general assembly meetings and votes this week. But it is evident that the militant, six-month-long student strike against the plans of Quebec's Liberal government to raise university tuition fees by 82 percent is petering out.

Last Friday was the deadline imposed by the Liberal's draconian Bill 78 (Law 12) for the resumption of the government-suspended winter term at the strike-hit CEGEPs. Bill 78 effectively criminalizes the student strike by banning all picketing in the vicinity of the province's post-secondary institutions and by threatening teachers with severe criminal sanctions if they made any accommodation to students boycotting their classes.

CEGEP students attending last week's general assembly meetings were met by a heavy police presence, so as to underscore the government's readiness to deploy them to enforce Bill 78 if students defied the political establishment and the unions and voted to continue their strike. The Quebec Federation of CEGEPs, meanwhile, threatened to cancel the semester in the event the strike continued.

A significant minority of students, nevertheless, voted to continue the strike and at two CEGEPs, Cegep St-Laurent and Cegep du Vieux-Montreal, students initially voted to remain on strike. But on Friday that decision was reversed after the administration at both colleges incited right-wing students to mount a petition campaign to demand a revote. To add further pressure on the students, both administrations said that canceling the semester would "entail the failure of all courses that have not been completed in the 2012 winter semester."

As at many of the other 14 CEGEPs, the students at Cegep St-Laurent voted to walk out this coming Wednesday, August 22, to join a mass demonstration against the university tuition fee hikes. Since March, CLASSE, the student association that has led the strike, has mounted a major demonstration on the 22nd of each month.

According to CLASSE, about 60,000 university students remain on strike and, buoyed by walkouts at many CEGEPs, as many as 100,000 could be on strike this Wednesday.

The threat of police repression and a cancelled semester undoubtedly weighed heavily on many students. But other forces have played an even more crucial role in sabotaging a militant social struggle that found broad support in the working class.

The trade unions, the Parti Quebecois (PQ), Quebec Solidaire (QS) and the establishment-aligned student associations, (FECQ) and (FEUQ), all worked to divert the students behind their campaign to replace the Liberals with a government led by the PQ—the Quebec bourgeoisie's alternate party of government for the past four decades.

In the name of maintaining "social peace," the unions tried for months to suppress the strike. In early May, they joined with Premier Jean Charest in seeking to bully students into accepting a sellout entente that called for the entire tuition fee increase to be imposed. And while the unions claimed to oppose Bill 78, from the very outset they pledged to enforce it. The unions vehemently opposed CLASSE's call for a "social strike", a broader protest movement involving limited worker job-action—an opposition underlined by their effective boycott of student demonstrations after 250,000 workers and youth took to the streets of Montreal on May 22 to denounce Bill 78.

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QS has been trying for months to convince the PQ to join it in an electoral alliance. They promote the PQ as a “lesser evil” than Charest’s Liberals, even though the PQ carried out the most drastic social spending cuts in the province’s history when it last held office.

FEUQ and FECQ are also very close to the PQ and for months have been working to end the strike, claiming that students should direct their energies into unseating the Liberals in the coming election. Leo Bureau-Blouin, who was FECQ’s president during the first four months of the student strike, is now a PQ election candidate.

As for CLASSE, its nationalist and protest politics led the strike into a political impasse. CLASSE opposed making the strike the spearhead of a working class challenge to the austerity measures being carried out by the Quebec Liberal and federal Conservative governments. For months, it explicitly limited the strike to a single-issue protest campaign, aimed at pressuring the government to negotiate. In late May, after the government had imposed Bill 78, it even agreed to negotiations based on the government’s reactionary fiscal framework and de facto acceptance of the draconian anti-strike law.

Throughout the strike CLASSE has refused to expose the PQ’s pose as a “student ally” or to criticize the unions, thereby lending support to their claim that the Liberals’ defeat in the September 4 provincial election would be a “victory” for the students.

In opposition to these forces, the Socialist Equality Party and the International Students for Social Equality held a public meeting in Montreal last Thursday to draw a political balance sheet of the strike and arm youth and workers with a socialist strategy based on the independent political mobilization of the working class—the only social force that has the power to break the stranglehold big business wields over social-economic life and thereby secure social rights, including the right to an education.

Speaking on behalf of the SEP, Richard Dufour insisted that the student strike had to be understood as part of a growing movement of the international working class against the efforts of the ruling elite around the world to make working people pay for the global capitalist crisis.

Dufour pointed in particular to the pernicious political influence of the “left” Quebec nationalism promoted by the unions, Quebec Solidaire and the entire pseudo-left.

“Workers in Quebec,” he explained, “have no interest whatsoever in supporting a section of the Quebec elite in its attempt to create its own nation-state where they will be ‘the masters.’ On the contrary, to defend their class interests, workers in Quebec should join forces with their class brothers and sisters across Canada, in the U.S. and internationally.

“Unemployment and falling living standards, the dismantling of public services, university tuition fee hikes, an escalating attack on democratic rights and the threat of new imperialist wars— the problems facing workers and youth in Quebec are fundamentally the same as those confronting workers around the world and only through an industrial and political offensive of the world working class for socialism can and will they be resolved.”

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