

CLASSE and Quebec's student federations welcome PQ's election

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The election of a minority Parti Québécois (PQ) government in last week's provincial election has been welcomed by Quebec's student associations, including CLASSE, the student group that led the six-month (February through August) student strike.

Pointing to the pledges of the big business PQ to scrap its Liberal predecessor's plan to raise university tuition fees by \$254 annually for the next seven years and to annul Bill 72 (Law 12), the Quebec College Students' Federation (FECQ) and Quebec University Students' Federation (FEUQ) declared the PQ's return to power "a victory for all Quebec students."

FECQ's and FEUQ's enthusiasm for the PQ victory was hardly surprising. For months they and their patrons in the trade unions had been urging students to make the defeat of the Liberals in the coming election their priority.

CLASSE was somewhat more guarded. In a statement issued Sept. 6, CLASSE said that it "welcomes with prudence the election of a minority PQ government," while observing that there are "still several outstanding questions." For his part, Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois, CLASSE's most prominent spokesman until he stepped down last month, echoed FECQ and FEUQ. "We should not be embarrassed," he declared, "to say that we won: the [tuition] increase will be set aside, Bill 12 also... and [Liberal Premier] Jean Charest has resigned."

The reality is otherwise. The bourgeoisie's austerity drive aimed at making the working class pay for the greatest crisis of capitalism since the Great Depression has not been derailed, nor education secured as a social right.

Through the elections Quebec's ruling elite succeeded in breaking the longest student strike in Quebec history—a strike that at its height, following the passage of Bill 78 last May, threatened to precipitate a mass movement of the working class—and in replacing the Liberals with the

PQ, long its alternate party of government.

The elections, coupled with Bill 78's threat of police violence and mass arrest, was the mechanism employed by the ruling class to divert the opposition to the Charest government's social spending cuts and regressive tax and user fee hikes into inoffensive political channels. Already in early June, *La presse*, Quebec's most influential newspaper and the mouthpiece of the billionaire Desmarais family, was urging the calling of elections, calculating that they would serve as a means to paint the strike as "anti-democratic" and to corral the students and the wider opposition movement that erupted in response to Bill 78 behind the PQ.

Ostensibly a party of the "left," the PQ has frequently been employed by the bourgeoisie to politically emasculate anti-establishment movements, especially of the working class, by feigning support. In the 1970s, the union bureaucracy joined forces with the PQ to harness a mass worker upsurge in Quebec to bourgeois politics and quarantine it from workers in the rest of North America. When the PQ last held office (1994-2003), it imposed the greatest social spending cuts in Quebec history, slashed taxes for big business and the rich, and used a Bill 78-type law to break a nurses' strike.

During the just completed election campaign, the PQ made no secret of its determination to continue where it left off in imposing the dictates of big business. It pledged to balance Quebec's budget and to hold the annual increase in government program spending for the next half decade to 2.4 percent, which, due to inflation and population growth, constitutes a huge per capita spending cut.

Even as PQ leader Pauline Marois shamelessly appealed for students to vote for her party so as to ensure they repeal of Bill 78, she urged students to obey the draconian law and end their strike, reiterated the PQ's support for raising tuition fees by at least the inflation rate, and mused

about the need to develop a better “framework” for student democracy (i.e. to impede the organization of student strikes).

Since winning the election, Marois has signaled she will scrap the Liberals’ tuition increase, but in doing so she has also vowed to cancel a \$39 million per year increase in bursaries for students from low-income families.

The ruling elite’s plans to scuttle the student trike were totally dependent on the support of the trade unions. It was the unions that isolated the students, ensuring that they faced the threat of state suppression under Bill 78 alone and that there was not an eruption like that which occurred in France in May-June 1968.

With workers in large numbers joining the protests against Bill 78, the head of Quebec’s largest union federation, the Quebec Federation of Labour (QFL), wrote to the Canadian Labour Congress in late May to demand that the unions in English Canada give the striking students no support. The unions’ pledged to obey Bill 78, vehemently opposed CLASSE’s call for a broader protest movement, and worked to channel the students behind their longtime ally the PQ, as exemplified by the QFL slogan “After the streets, to the ballot box.”

Québec’s Solidaire (QS) and Quebec’s pseudo-left also promoted the lie that students and the working-class could make major gains through the elections. QS repeatedly volunteered its services to the PQ, offering in June to join a PQ-led electoral alliance of “sovereignist” parties, declaring that its fondest desire was that it would be in a position to prop up a PQ minority government, and guaranteeing support for a PQ minority government for at least a year.

For one to say that the student strike had advanced the struggle to defend and broaden accessibility to education and oppose the ruling class assault on public services and workers’ living standards and rights, it would have been necessary for students and their supporters to have fought to make the strike the spearhead of a working class counter-offensive. A turn to the working class—the only social force that can provide a genuine progressive alternative to big business’ program of austerity and social reaction—requires a struggle to build new worker organizations in opposition to the pro-capitalist unions, which as the student strike itself demonstrated, serve to suppress, not defend, the workers.

Although CLASSE initiated the strike, it played a major role in smothering it, by confining the strike to a single-issue protest aimed at pressuring the elite to withdraw the tuition fee hikes and confining it within the framework of

Quebec. After the unions’ rejected its call for a “social strike,” CLASSE fell silent, making no effort to broaden the struggle and refusing to even criticize the unions. At the same time, it ever-more explicitly embraced the claim that the defeat of Charest’s Liberals at the hand of the PQ would advance the students’ struggle.

Now CLASSE is calling on students to orient towards pressuring the PQ to make good on its promises. In keeping with this perspective, CLASSE has announced that it wants to meet with Marois and to participate in an education summit the PQ has promised to convene later this year.

The PQ intends to use this “national” summit on the financing and administration of universities to press forward with its plan to impose tuition fee hikes, beginning with the indexing of fees to the inflation rate. Marois has also said that such a summit, which will be dominated by representatives of the government, big business, and university administrations, will be free to advance its own proposals on university financing, including much larger tuition fee hikes.

The PQ has a long experience in organizing such “national” summits as a means of claiming a Quebec-wide consensus for imposing unpopular policies. In 1996, the QFL and the other union federations participated in the socio-economic summit convened by the PQ government of Lucien Bouchard and gave their support for massive social spending cuts in the name of eliminating the province’s budget deficit. In fact it was the unions that advocated the early retirement scheme the PQ used to eliminate tens of thousands of health care and education jobs.



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