

The PQ budget and the 2012 Quebec student strike

International Youth Students for Social Equality (Canada)
3 December 2012

The following International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) statement was distributed at a demonstration against the “commodification of education” held in Montreal on November 22. Translated from the French, the statement has been slightly edited for publication in English.

The events surrounding the demonstration—which was called by the Association for Student-Union Solidarity (ASSE), the successor organization to CLASSE, the student group that led the Quebec student strike of this past spring and summer—provided further substantiation of the analysis and warnings made in the IYSSE statement.

The demonstration was opposed by the Quebec Federation of University Students (FEUQ) and the Quebec Federation of College Students (FECQ) and by their allies in the trade union bureaucracy. FEUQ and FECQ are urging students to forego all protests, so as not to disrupt their collaboration with the big business Parti Québécois government in mounting an “Education Summit” next February that is to be used to provide the government with political cover for raising university tuition fees.

At its Nov. 22nd rally ASSE, continuing the nationalist-protest perspective that resulted in the student strike being suppressed and harnessed to the trade unions’ campaign to bring to power the PQ, made no mention of the austerity budget the PQ delivered on November 20. This omission underscores ASSE’s own adaptation to the PQ, the Quebec bourgeoisie’s alternate party of government, and its determination to separate students’ struggle for access to education from a working-class challenge to the austerity agenda of big business and all its political representatives.

The most important issue facing those joining today’s protest is to draw the rich political lessons from the past year of struggle.

From February through August, Quebec students carried out a courageous strike to defend the right to quality higher education. Their struggle was not simply in opposition to the dramatic rise in university tuition fees demanded by the previous Liberal government. Objectively, the strike represented a challenge to the entire ruling elite, which is determined to force the working class to pay for the world capitalist crisis.

That is why all the institutions of the bourgeoisie and its state—the government, the courts, the mass media—were mobilized to isolate and intimidate the striking students. They sought to break the strike through a coordinated campaign of media smears, police

violence, court injunctions and draconian legislation (Bill 78).

But these measures had the opposite effect. They strengthened the resolve of the striking students and brought into the fight new social layers, above all the working class—which has seen an acceleration of the three-decade-old assault on its social position, through job, wage and social spending cuts, since the global financial crash of 2008.

Fearing that the student strike could provoke a wider social movement, as happened in France in May-June 1968, and threaten the capitalist social order, a section of the ruling class called for new elections as a means of diverting the opposition movement into “safe” political channels. *La Presse*, Quebec’s most influential daily and the mouthpiece of the billionaire Desmarais family, led the media clamour for an early election.

The trade unions, which for weeks had been seeking to force an end to the strike so as to preserve “social peace,” rallied to this appeal. Just days after the president of the Quebec Federation of Labour (QFL), Quebec’s largest labour federation, had written to the president of the Canadian Labour Congress to urge that no support be given the striking students, the QFL leadership trumpeted the slogan “After the streets, to the ballot box.”

Having for months left the students to face the government and police alone, the unions intervened to sabotage the strike, with crucial support from Québec Solidaire, the anarchists and the entire pseudo-left. All these forces opposed making the student strike the spearhead for a mobilization of the working class in Quebec and across North America against the austerity program of the bourgeoisie. All claimed that the defeat of the Liberals at the hands of the PQ would be a step forward if not an outright victory for the students, on the grounds that PQ was “progressive” or at least the “lesser evil” and more amenable to pressure.

The IYSSE, the youth movement of the Socialist Equality Party, fought to expose this fraud. We explained that for decades the PQ has served as the Quebec bourgeoisie’s alternative party of government and that like other “left” parties of government—be it the British Labour Party, the Socialist Party in France, the NDP in Canada, or the Democratic Party in the U.S.—its special function has been to contain popular discontent, the better to enable the bourgeoisie to pursue class war.

At the beginning of the election campaign, we wrote on the *World Socialist Web Site*: “The PQ claims to be a party of the ‘left’, but it has a record of decades of anti-working class austerity policies and brutal anti-strike laws. Even if the PQ criticized some

right-wing Liberal measures...it has also repeatedly denounced the government for failing to cut spending and taxes quickly enough.”

Our warnings have been fully confirmed by the first budget of the new PQ government of Pauline Marois. Submitted two days ago, the budget’s main objective is to achieve the austerity goal set by its Liberal predecessor of eliminating the provincial deficit in the 2013-14 fiscal year. To do this, program expenditures will be increased by just 1.8 percent, the lowest rate in 15 years. In the midst of the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s, when social programs are more needed than ever, the PQ government is forcing through sharp expenditure cuts.

Other budget measures include: the elimination of 2,000 Hydro-Quebec jobs; an increase in electricity rates; increased consumption taxes; and the maintaining of the previous Liberal government’s health care head tax in only slightly less regressive form. At the same time, the budget gives massive additional tax concessions to big business, and proposes to set aside billions to repay the debt, i.e., to enrich investors while depriving people of needed public services.

Exemplifying the ruling class’ enthusiasm for the PQ budget, Quebec Manufacturers and Exporters President Simon Prévost, told Radio-Canada that he had “not seen such a good budget in a long time.”

Québec Solidaire (QS) has responded to the budget by decrying it as a budget of “dashed hopes.” The QS’s attempt to present itself as a violated innocent should fool no one. During the student strike, QS promoted the PQ as preferable to the Liberals, even while criticizing the PQ for having turned its back on its purportedly progressive policies of the 1970s in favor of “neoliberalism.”

In June, QS appealed to the PQ for an electoral alliance. And in the final days of the election campaign, the QS’s co-leaders, Françoise David and Amir Khadir, announced that were their party to hold the balance of power in a minority parliament it would guarantee a PQ government its support for at least year.

Since its formation, the QS has sought to join with the PQ in a “pro-sovereignty alliance”, thereby underscoring its ambition to assist that wing of the Quebec bourgeoisie which views an independent capitalist *République du Québec* as the best means of prevailing in the inter-capitalist struggle for market and profits and intensifying the exploitation of “its” working class.

Along with the trade unions, the PQ’s longtime political allies, Québec Solidaire bears political responsibility for the PQ’s austerity budget—a budget moreover which is clearly only the opening volley in anti-working class assault.

The collapse of the student strike and the channeling of the opposition movement behind the elections and the PQ was also the outcome of the nationalist and protest politics promoted by CLASSE (the Broader Coalition of the Association for Student-Union Solidarity). According to CLASSE, all that was necessary to force Jean Charest’s Liberal government to withdraw its tuition fees increases was to bring large numbers of students onto the streets and to get them to shout loud enough—a perspective typified by the slogan “Cry louder so they can’t ignore us.”)

CLASSE deliberately separated the struggle against the tuition fee hikes from a broader struggle against the austerity measures of

the Charest government.

Because of this, CLASSE rejected the only way forward for students—to make a broad appeal to the working class for a joint counteroffensive in defence of all public and social services, jobs and worker rights and against a bankrupt capitalism system that subordinates the elementary social needs of working people to the profits of a tiny, bloated elite.

CLASSE’s protest politics are associated with a nationalist perspective, which viewed the students’ strike as a purely Quebec question. CLASSE made no appeal to students outside Quebec, let alone to the working class across Canada. It refused to draw the obvious link between the assault on education in Quebec and the austerity programs being imposed by the ruling class in Greece, across Europe and around the world. During six months of demonstrations and student rallies, CLASSE made virtually no mention of the federal Conservative government and its cuts to Medicare, pensions, unemployment benefits and its strikebreaking laws.

When the struggle reached the critical turning point in May and June, with workers joining the protests against Bill 78 in large numbers, CLASSE completely adapted to the union-led campaign to divert the student strike behind the election of a PQ government. Facing fierce opposition from the unions, CLASSE quickly dropped its timid calls for a larger protest movement, what it had termed a “social strike”. It declared that the key issue was to defeat neoliberalism, thereby rejecting the struggle against capitalism and all its political representatives, and its spokesmen lent support to the claims that the election of the PQ would advance the interests of students and working people.

None of the issues raised in the 2012 strike have been resolved. The budget tabled this week by the new PQ government is a clear signal that class conflicts will intensify in the coming period. Students and young people must draw the lessons of the strike, especially concerning the failure of protest politics, the class nature of the PQ and Quebec nationalism, and the role of the unions as servants of big business.

The working class is the only force that can break the stranglehold of big business over social-economic life and reorganize society so the fulfillment of social needs, not the enriching of the wealthy, is made the animating principle. But for the creative power and energy of the working class to be mobilized, it must be armed with a socialist and internationalist strategy and become an independent political force. We call on youth and students who agree with this revolutionary perspective to contact the Socialist Equality Party and join and build its youth movement, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact