

Parti Québécois' education summit—a mechanism for imposing tuition fee hikes and spending cuts

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4 January 2013

Quebec's trade unions and student associations are lending their support to the phoney "national summit" on higher education that the Parti Québécois (PQ) government will convene next month.

The Quebec College Students Federation (FECQ) and the Quebec University Students Federation (FEUQ)—student groups long-patronized by the trade union bureaucracy—are opposing student demonstrations and token walkouts on the openly right-wing grounds that they could interfere with the preparations for the summit. The Association for Student Union Solidarity (ASSE), the student group that launched the now disbanded CLASSE and led last year's six month-long province-wide student strike, is, for its part, participating in the various preparatory meetings for the summit, thereby lending it legitimacy.

Yet from the get-go it has been clear from that summit's sole purpose is to provide the big business PQ government with political cover for raising university tuition fees and otherwise revamping the education system in accordance with corporate demands. Not only has the PQ frequently resorted to such tri-partite (government-big business-union) summits to claim a "national consensus" in favor of right-wing measures—most famously in 1996, when at two such summits the unions signed on to brutal austerity measures in the name of eliminating the provincial deficit. Since last summer the PQ has been saying that it will argue at the summit for annual tuition increases.

Moreover, in the less than four months that the PQ has formed Quebec's government, it has moved decisively to continue and intensify the austerity program of its Liberal predecessor.

In November, the government introduced an emergency provincial budget that imposed the steepest cuts in spending in 15 years and was uniformly acclaimed by Quebec's corporate and financial elite as a pro-business, "Liberal" budget.

And in early December, the PQ government ordered the province's universities to slash a further \$124 million from their budgets in the current fiscal year, which ends March 31. Rectors of the province's universities have warned the "additional fiscal effort" demanded by the government will be almost impossible to meet and will badly undermine the quality of education.

The PQ's rapid embrace of austerity should come as a surprise to no one. One of the Quebec elite's two parties of government for the last four decades, the PQ is a tried and trusted instrument of big business. When it last held office (1994-2003), it carried out the greatest social spending cuts in Quebec history and used draconian legislation to criminalize and break a nurses' strike. When in opposition, PQ Premier Pauline Marois and Nicholas Marceau, now Quebec's finance minister, repeatedly attacked Jean Charest and his Liberals for not cutting government spending quickly enough.

However, in the run-up to last September's provincial election, the PQ was boosted by the trade unions and the pseudo-left Québec Solidaire (QS) as a progressive alternative. Anxious to suppress the militant student strike, the unions, as exemplified by the Quebec Federation of Labour's slogan "After the streets, to the ballot box," sought to channel the opposition to the Liberals' austerity measures behind the PQ. In June, QS offered to form an electoral alliance with the PQ and just days before the September

4 election it announced that if it held the balance of power it would guarantee its support to a minority PQ government for at least a year, no questions asked.

The student associations also played a pivotal role in isolating the students' strike and politically smothering it. After the passage of Bill 78 in May, FECQ and FEUQ did everything to sabotage the strike and rally students behind the PQ. By June, the leaders of FECQ and FEUQ were publicly declaring that their priority was mobilizing students to "get rid of the Liberals" in the coming election. Their close ties to the PQ were symbolized by the selection of outgoing FECQ president Léo Bureau-Blouin as a PQ candidate. (Now a newly-minted National Assembly member, Bureau-Blouin is to serve as co-chair of the PQ's education summit.)

ASSE and CLASSE, while opposing at the eleventh hour the calls from the PQ and the establishment as a whole for the student strike to be called off during the election campaign, adapted themselves wholesale to the unions' maneuvers to suppress the strike. They abandoned their call for a larger protest movement, a "social strike," once the unions made clear their vociferous opposition, and they joined in the promotion of the PQ, saying Charest's electoral defeat would be a "victory" for the students.

And ASSE continues to obscure the PQ's role and separate the students' struggle from a broader working-class challenge to the austerity measures being pursued by the Quebec government and the Canadian ruling class as a whole. Speakers at the demonstration ASSE held in Montreal on November 22 to oppose the "commodification of education," including ASSE spokeswomen Jeanne Reynolds, continued to claim that the student strike had ended in "victory," while conveniently avoiding any mention of the austerity budget the PQ had tabled just two days before.

The budget and the subsequent immediate \$124 million cut in university funding underscore that far from being a "victory" for the students, the election of the PQ was a mechanism employed by the ruling class and its agents in the union officialdom to suppress the student strike and prepare the terrain for further measures aimed at making working people pay for the crisis of the capitalist profit system, including tuition fee hikes and cuts to education.

After various flip-flops, Marois announced last spring

that a PQ government would cancel the Liberals' tuition fee hike schedule and convene an education summit at which it would press for the annual "indexation" of university tuition fees.

Indexation would put paid to students' demand for a tuition freeze, let alone their justifiable call for education to be recognized as a "social right," and do so under conditions where students in Quebec, as across North America, are facing mounting debt loads and where rising tuition fees have become an increasingly important barrier to access to education.

Predictably, the government is now seeking a means to ram through tuition fee increases substantially greater than inflation-indexing. At one of the preparatory meetings for next month's education summit, the government asked the economist Pierre Fortin to outline different scenarios for indexation. According to Fortin, if the government indexes university fees to the cost-of-living that would result in a \$46 annual increase, but if it instead indexes them to the yearly increase in university costs then tuitions would have to be hiked by \$84. Fortin's scenarios made no mention of the almost \$1,000 in ancillary fees that universities now charge students on top of their tuition fees.



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