

Quebec's education summit: A cover for university tuition fee hikes

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25 February 2013

Today and tomorrow, Quebec's Parti Québécois (PQ) government will hold an education summit to provide political cover for imposing university tuition fee hikes and subordinating post-secondary education even more completely to the exigencies of big business.

The summit will bring together government and opposition leaders, representatives of big business, university and CEGEP (junior and technical college) administrators, the presidents of Quebec's major labor federations, the heads of unions representing university and CEGEP teachers, and the leaders of all but one of the province's student associations.

While the summit's purported aim is to arrive at a "national consensus" on university financing, the government has made it known that it intends to institute annual university tuition fee hikes and has already ordered universities to impose \$250 million in spending cuts by the end of March 2014.

In preparation for the summit, the government has proposed various "indexation" formulas that would raise tuition fees from between \$46 and \$83 per year. Quebec university students currently pay annual tuition fees of \$2,175, plus administrative fees of on average \$800 per year.

The government has also said that it is willing to consider the imposition of higher tuition fees at the province's large research universities and/or by departments, such as medicine and dentistry, with above-average costs.

The big business PQ came to power last September by posing as an ally of the students and the popular opposition to the seven-year, 82 percent hike in university tuition fees ordered by the Liberal government of Jean Charest. The Liberal tuition fee hikes and the Charest government's subsequent adoption of Law 12 (Bill 78)—legislation that effectively criminalized the then more than more three month-old student strike and imposed sweeping restrictions on the right to demonstrate—provoked mass opposition. At its height in late May, this opposition threatened to become the catalyst for a broader working-class challenge to the ruling class' austerity agenda.

Ultimately, the student strike petered out last August, when the lengthy, government-imposed "suspension" of the spring semester at strike-hit CEGEPs and university departments came to an end. While the threat of sanctions under Bill 12 played a

role, the principal reason that the strike collapsed was that the trade unions, the student associations, Québec Solidaire and other pseudo-left groups politically diverted it behind the PQ, which for the past four decades has served as the Quebec elite's "left" party of government. CLASSE, the student group that led the strike, abruptly dropped its call for "a social strike," as soon as the unions signalled their virulent opposition, and its spokespersons repeatedly suggested that Charest's defeat at the hands of the PQ would constitute a "victory" for students.

On taking office, the minority PQ government canceled the Liberal tuition fee hikes and suspended Law 12, so as to shore up a capitalist political order that had been shaken by the half-year long student strike. That accomplished, the PQ pivoted to imposing capitalist austerity. During the fall, the PQ government abandoned a series of populist election promises, including a pledge to modestly raise capital-gains taxes, then enforced an "emergency" austerity budget that imposes the steepest spending cuts in 15 years.

In the run-up to this week's summit, the government has been seeking to dampen expectations. Last Friday, Education Minister Pierre Duchesne said that, unlike the PQ-convened 1996 economic summits at which the unions gave their support for massive social spending cuts, the government is not expecting the education summit to produce an agreement or even a common communiqué. "At this time," said Duchesne, "there is no question of a common declaration that everybody signs. What we are aiming for is to have discussions and to advance things sufficiently that we can say we're going in this or that direction. It's not a question of getting people to sign anything whatsoever."

The unions and the student associations most closely aligned with the unions, the Quebec University Students Federation (FEUQ) and the Quebec College Students Federation (FECQ), have signaled that they are ready to be "persuaded" to except indexation, i.e. annual tuition fee increases. FEUQ has convened a congress beginning Monday morning so it can, as needed, vote to give its president, Martine Desjardins, the "flexibility" to negotiate with the government. Yesterday it held a joint press conference with the leadership of the PQ's youth organization, the *Comité é national des jeunes du Parti Québécois*.

The unions, it should be recalled, bullied the student associations last May into accepting an agreement—subsequently overwhelmingly rejected by the striking students—that would have fully imposed the Liberal tuition increases.

Big business, the corporate media, and the university rectors have, on the other hand, indicated that they consider the “mere” indexation of tuition fees to be an undue concession to the students. And the two other major big business parties, the Liberals and the CAQ (Coalition avenir Québec), have opposed the PQ’s cuts to university spending, although they are in full agreement with the PQ’s insistence that the budget be balanced in the coming fiscal year and want further tax cuts.

In a statement that elicited much favorable press comment, McGill Principal Heather Monroe-Blum recently dismissed the summit as a “farce,” saying the government has already taken the key fiscal decisions in advance.

ASSE (the Association for Student Union Solidarity), the successor organization to CLASSE, participated in all the preparatory meetings for the education summit. However, on Feb. 14, three days after its representatives had met with PQ Premier Pauline Marois and Education Minister Duchesne, ASSE announced that it will boycott the education summit because the government is not prepared to seriously discuss its proposal for the abolition of tuition fees.

Prior to the closed door discussions with Marois, ASSE issued a series of “ultimatums,” none of which made an issue of the university budget cuts, let alone the PQ government’s austerity agenda.

In announcing ASSE’s decision to boycott the summit, ASSE spokesman Jérémie Bédard-Wien said his organization has no intention of legitimizing “another” tuition fee hike: “We will defend the option of free education and we will try to block indexation in the streets.”

Bédard-Wien went on to denounce the PQ for having “surfing on the wave” of the Quebec student strike. “They surfed on promises like the canceling of the university tuition fee hikes, the canceling of the [regressive, per head] health care tax ... but they have retreated on each one of these issues. The PQ is not a progressive party. It pretends to be a progressive party, but in the end, it listens above all to big business.”

What Bédard-Wien didn’t and wouldn’t say is that if the PQ was able to exploit the popular opposition to the Charest Liberal government and deceive students and workers it was because ASSE and its allies—the unions, Québec Solidaire (QS), and the pseudo-left as a whole—promoted the lie that the big business PQ constituted a “lesser evil,” if not a progressive alternative, to the Liberals.

In June, QS appealed to the PQ for an electoral alliance and, in the final week of the campaign for the September 4 election, it pledged that if it held the balance of power it would prop up a minority PQ government without asking for any policy commitments whatsoever.

Rather than warn students about the PQ’s record in imposing the program of big business, including adopting draconian Bill 78-type strikebreaking laws, CLASSE appealed to PQ leader Marois to put back her red-square (a badge symbolizing the strike) last June, when she made a show of taking it off, so as to reassure big business of her party’s right-wing intentions.

ASSE, unlike its union and QS allies, has chosen at the eleventh hour to boycott the PQ summit. But this in no way represents a break with its middle-class, nationalist protest perspective. It continues to separate opposition to tuition fee hikes and the fight for education to be recognized as a social right from any broader opposition to the ruling class drive to make working people pay for the capitalist crisis through job and wage cuts and the dismantling of social services. Indeed, in its propaganda for a demonstration outside the summit on Tuesday, it makes no mention of the PQ government’s austerity measures, not even the cuts to university budgets, let alone those being implemented by the federal Conservative government and the political representatives of big business across Canada and around the world.

ASSE’s perspective has led students into a blind alley. A year after the launching of a student strike that could have served as the catalyst for the development of a powerful working-class counter-offensive, the elite of Quebec and Canada are pushing forward with a veritable social counter-revolution. Unemployment insurance, pensions, health care and all social services are being slashed, and the Quebec government is about to impose further university tuition fee hikes.

To secure basic social rights, including the right to free quality education, students must turn to the working class, the only social force with the power to break the political and economic domination of big business, and fight to mobilize it as an independent political force armed with a socialist program.



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