

Quebec: PQ imposes annual hikes in university tuition fees

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Using a phony “national” Education Summit as a backdrop, Quebec’s Parti Québécois (PQ) government announced Tuesday that henceforth university tuition fees will rise annually by at least 3 percent.

“It’s clear,” said Quebec Premier Pauline Marois in closing the two-day summit, “that it has been very difficult to arrive at a consensus. But at such a moment it is up to the government to take up its responsibilities. I’m doing that.”

The government had hoped that its trade union and student association allies would formally endorse the tuition fee hikes. But given the events of last year—a six-month long province-wide student strike that at its height threatened to trigger a mass movement of the working class in opposition to big business’ austerity agenda—the unions and FEUQ (Quebec Federation of University Students) and FECQ (Quebec Federation of College Students) deemed it politic to claim that they oppose the government’s decision.

Nonetheless, the union and student leaders made it crystal clear that they will do precisely nothing to oppose the tuition fee hikes, just as they have acquiesced before the PQ’s emergency budget of last November. That budget imposed the steepest social spending cuts in 15 years, including \$250 million in cuts to university budgets to be implemented by March 2014, and discarded PQ election promises to eliminate a regressive per capita health care tax and partially freeze electricity rates.

FEUQ President Martine Desjardins said she was “disappointed” by the government’s decision to “index” tuition fees—in reality it is raising them by considerably more than the inflation rate. “But students,” she rushed to add, “aren’t leaving with empty hands.”

As proof of her claim, Desjardins pointed to Marois’

announcement that the government will allow one of the five working groups it has established to continue the “dialogue” on university accessibility, financing, and management to discuss its decision—announced along with tuition fee hike—to raise university administrative fees by 3 percent per year. (In addition to \$2,275 in annual tuition, Quebec students pay on average \$800 in administrative fees per year.)

“Unfortunately, we have to live with the hikes that are proposed,” said Daniel Boyer, the general-secretary of the Quebec Federation of Labour. Asked by reporters if there was ever question of the unions quitting the summit to protest the government’s unilateral imposition of the tuition fee hikes, Boyer gave an emphatic no: “We don’t want to act like little children every time we don’t get everything we want.”

The unions’ posturing at the summit as partisans of a tuition freeze and even the eventual abolition of tuition fees was utterly cynical.

They played the principal role in isolating and politically suppressing last year’s student strike.

In the name of preserving “social peace,” the presidents of the QFL, the Confederation of National Trades Unions and the Centrale des syndicats du Québec joined with Charest in early May in bullying student leaders into accepting a sellout agreement. That agreement, which was overwhelmingly rejected by Quebec’s students, would have raised tuition fees by more than 80 percent over 7 years beginning last September.

When the Liberal government’s imposition of a draconian anti-strike law Bill 78 provoked mass opposition in the working class, the unions intensified their efforts to end the strike. The head of the QFL wrote the president of the Canadian Labor Congress to insist that no support should be given to the striking

students and all the unions joined forces to divert the opposition movement behind the PQ, the Quebec elite's alternate party of government—as exemplified by the QFL slogan “After the streets, to the ballot box.”

Assisted by the unions, the student federations, and Québec Solidaire, the PQ posed as a supporter of the striking students, with Marois for months wearing the “red square” that symbolized the strike. But at the summit, she and Education Minister Pierre Duchesne gave vent to their and the ruling class' hostility to the students' militant challenge to the ruling class drive to dismantle public services through cuts, privatization and the imposition of the user-pay principal. Time and again, they deplored the events of last spring as a period of “division” and “social crisis” that had “damaged” Quebec's “image.” At one point Marois dismissed the so-called Maple Spring as a “psychodrama.”

Important sections of big business and the corporate media, have criticized the 3 percent tuition fee hike as inadequate. The Conseil de Patronat accused Marois of “buying social peace.”

But the government believes that imposing tuition increases that even in their first year will only be slightly smaller than the \$100 per year increases the Liberals imposed between 2007 and 2011 is important for demonstrating—to big business and working people alike—its determination to impose right-wing measures in the face of mass opposition. In concluding the summit, Marois boasted, “The social crisis is behind us.”

Moreover, the government has established mechanisms through which more substantial increases could be imposed in the near future. One of the working groups is charged with considering whether departments that offer more costly programs should be allowed to charge higher fees, as well as whether non-native Quebec students are paying their “fair” share.

ASSE—the successor organization to CLASSE, the student group that led last year's strike—chose at the eleventh hour to boycott the summit, on the grounds that the summit was a “political show” and that the PQ was “betraying” students by not seriously considering its demand for the gradual phasing out of tuition fees.

But ASSE itself did much to encourage illusions in the PQ and its phony “national” summit. It participated in all the pre-summit meetings, has failed to speak out

against the PQ's budget cuts, and adapted to the campaign of the unions, FECQ and FEUQ to channel the student strike behind the PQ, with leading ASSE representatives repeatedly saying Charest's defeat would be a “victory.”

While an implicit admission of the failure of its orientation, ASSE's boycott of this week's summit is a continuation of its nationalist, middle-class protests perspective of pressuring the Quebec elite for concessions.

It made no criticism of the trade union leaders who participated in the summit—just as it meekly submitted to the unions and dropped its call for a “social strike” last spring, once the unions signaled their virulent opposition. And it continues to separate the struggle for education to be recognized as a social right from the struggle to mobilize the working class as an independent political force against the ruling class agenda of brutal austerity and job and wage cuts.

More than 10,000 students and their supporters participated Tuesday in a march called by ASSE through downtown Montreal, once again bearing witness to the growing radicalization of young people.

Speaking at a rally before the march, an ASSE spokesman from CEGEP de Valleyfield repeated ASSE's claim the strike had ended in victory—no matter that the PQ had just imposed tuition fee hikes in perpetuity and has imposed social spending cuts far beyond those of its Liberal predecessor. Vowing that ASSE will continue on the same course, he declared, “Student unionism functions and makes gains ... We will pull up our sleeves, return to our assemblies, and continue to do what we have done before—organize and mobilize.”

With a view to drawing the real lessons of the student strike, supporters of the WSWs distributed hundreds of copies of a statement titled, “The education summit and the bankruptcy of the politics of ASSE: to oppose the assault on public services student must turn to the working class.”



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