

Quebec's Education Summit and the failure of ASSE's protest perspective

International Youth and Students for Social Equality (Canada)
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Supporters of the IYSSE and the World Socialist Web Site distributed this statement at the Tuesday, February 26 demonstration organized by the student group ASSE to protest the Quebec government's education summit. At the summit, the Parti Québécois government imposed annual university tuition fees hikes of 3 percent and opened the door to still greater increases for students enrolled in more costly programs or from outside Quebec.

The Quebec Higher Education Summit is a political ploy of the ruling Parti Québécois (PQ) aimed at giving the appearance of a "national consensus" for the introduction of annual increases in university tuition fees.

The PQ was elected last fall after it falsely displayed sympathy for Quebec's striking students so as to disguise its real agenda: making workers and youth pay for the global and systemic crisis of the capitalist profit system.

After taking power last September, the PQ government of Pauline Marois canceled tuition increases enacted by the previous Liberal government. This tactical retreat was designed to defuse a major social crisis. The PQ's real program was soon made clear with November's announcement of an austerity budget that was warmly welcomed by financial markets.

The budget made the steepest social spending cuts in 15 years; eliminated 2,000 jobs at Hydro-Québec; continued the Liberals' regressive healthcare head tax; maintained tax cuts on the capital gains of the wealthy; and allotted billions of dollars to repay government debt at the expense of public services. Subsequently, the PQ announced that university spending is to be cut by \$250 million by April 2014.

It was entirely predictable that the Parti Québécois, once in power, would continue and indeed intensify implementation of big business' austerity program. The PQ, no less than the Liberals, is a capitalist party—an instrument of the establishment. Its role is to relentlessly defend the ruling class, all the while posing as a progressive force sympathetic to the concerns of ordinary people.

Those who ignore the class nature of the PQ and present the Marois government's partial retreat over tuition increases as evidence that the students' struggle ended in victory are deceiving students and preventing them from learning the true lessons of last year's strike.

The student strike of 2012 had profound objective significance. It was an expression of the growing international resistance to the brutal austerity measures being implemented by the political

representatives of big business around the world. And precisely for this reason, it could not succeed unless students turned to the working class and made the fight against rising tuition the spearhead of a counter-offensive against the destruction of jobs, the dismantling of social services and the general decline in workers' living standards and social position.

This was the perspective fought for by the *World Socialist Web Site*, the Socialist Equality Party and its youth wing, the IYSSE. But this perspective was rejected by those who led the student strike and had political influence over its leaders.

The trade unions abandoned students to face the government, the courts and the police alone. When, following the passage of Bill 78, the students' struggle nonetheless threatened to precipitate a mass movement of the working-class and a challenge to the existing social order, the Quebec Federation of Labour (FTQ) intervened aggressively to shut the strike down and channel students behind the PQ and the bourgeois electoral process. This was exemplified by its slogan, which served as the rallying cry for the unions as a whole: "After the streets, to the ballot box!"

This operation to torpedo the strike and divert it behind the big business PQ could not have succeeded without the political support of Québec Solidaire (QS), a Quebec sovereignist party promoted by the pseudo-left. For years the QS has tried to reach an electoral alliance with the PQ, as part of its broader perspective of integrating itself in the political establishment and pushing the PQ to the "left." Last June, as the unions and others were pressing for the strike to be "transformed" into a campaign to defeat Charest at the polls, Québec Solidaire touted the PQ as a "lesser evil" to the "right-wing" Liberals and formally offered to join the PQ in a "sovereignist" electoral alliance. And just days before the September 4 election campaign, the QS's principal leaders, Francoise David and Amir Khadir, promised their unconditional support for a minority PQ government in the event QS ended up holding the balance of power.

And then there was the role of CLASSE/ASSÉ, the student association most closely associated with the strike. Its leaders deliberately separated the fight against tuition fee increases from any broader challenge to the government's austerity program, insisting that if the students put enough pressure on the government and the Quebec elite they would relent on tuition fee hikes. This protest outlook, based on an acceptance of the inviolability of the existing capitalist order, was intimately bound up with a Quebec nationalist perspective that precluded any appeal

to students and workers in English Canada. This nationalist, single-issue protest orientation led the strike into an impasse, ultimately resulting in its collapse and defeat.

ASSE's last-minute decision to boycott the PQ's Education Summit is an attempt to obscure the failure of its protest politics so as to continue down the same road of pressuring the Quebec elite. Its leaders never criticized, let alone challenged, the unions' isolation and sabotage of the student strike. Once the unions made clear their opposition to it, CLASSE's leaders dropped their call for a "social strike" like a lead balloon. ASSÉ promoted the lie that a PQ victory would be a "gain" if not an outright "victory" for students. And in response to the PQ's austerity budget, they maintained a guilty silence, while participating in all the preparatory meetings to this week's summit.

The reasons they now give for their boycott—that they were misled by Marois and her PQ and that the government has reneged on its promises—are an implicit admission of the failure of their perspective and orientation.

The *Déclaration de la Base face au Sommet* (Statement of the Base toward the Summit)—issued on February 24 by various middle-class protest groups, including feminists, environmentalists, anarchists, "Teachers against the Hike," and ASSÉ itself—only serves to underscore the bankruptcy of protest politics.

The statement extols the student strike for having "opened and created a real political space for reflection, debate and action," generated an "air of hope, mobilization and creation" and given rise to "many experiences of autonomy and democracy." But the statement is silent on the most important question: the strike ended in a defeat, not only for students, but for the working class as a whole.

Last year's student strike could have become the catalyst for a working class counter-offensive against the destruction of jobs, lowering of wages and destruction of public services. But instead it was channeled behind the PQ, which once in power has put into place austerity measures—including cuts to education and tuition fee hikes—even more brutal than those imposed by the previous Liberal government.

Exposing how and why this happened, drawing students' and workers' attention to the political forces that facilitated the strike's defeat and critiquing the conceptions that they promoted, is critical for preparing the next stage of the struggle. But it is precisely this that the authors of the "Statement of the Base toward the Summit" want to prevent.

In the statement's most revealing passage, its authors acknowledge that the summit had become "necessary in order to respond to the [student] movement," but now, alas, the summit "aims essentially to bury it."

But for whom was the summit—based as it is on the lie that the needs of working people and the profit drive of big business can be reconciled—"necessary," if not the ruling class? The coming to power of a minority PQ government, with a vague promise of dialogue with students was, for the ruling class, a small price to pay to bring to heel a youth rebellion that threatened to provoke a working class upsurge.

And if the ruling class is now in a position to "bury" the student

struggle, it is because the signatories of this declaration, especially ASSÉ, all opposed making it the spearhead of an independent political movement of the working class directed against the austerity program of the entire Canadian ruling class. Such an orientation would have meant a direct challenge to the pro-capitalist trade unions and fighting to build new organizations of working class struggle.

Instead ASSÉ and the other authors of the statement either openly echoed the bureaucrats' line that the key issue was to defeat the Liberals, thereby helping the ruling class channel the strike behind use its traditional "left" party of government, the PQ; or they advocated "direct action," more aggressive student-centered protests, that left students alone to fight the government and the entire repressive apparatus of the state.

These middle class protesters today deplore the actions of the PQ and are heaping invective at the Education Summit: "a not very successful public relations campaign"; "a big business vision of university governance"; "accountants' logic". But this will not take away their own political responsibility for the PQ's coming to power and the devastating impact of its austerity measures on workers and youth.

Moreover, when everything is said and done, this statement fails to draw the essential political conclusions about the PQ—that it is a big business party; and it is completely silent on the role of the unions, whose leaders, having sabotaged the student strike, have assumed their traditional place as "partners" of the government at this week's summit. For all their denunciations of the PQ's "betrayal" the middle-class left continues to orbit politically around it and around the pro-capitalist unions, which for decades have politically subordinated the working class to the PQ.

It is the politics of protest that led to the failure of the student strike of 2012. A new orientation is needed. Its starting point must be a recognition of the international nature of the current crisis. Not only in Quebec but across Canada and around the world, workers and young people confront an all-out attack on their rights and living standards. Jobs, wages, public services—everything must be sacrificed to satisfy the financial markets and enrich the ruling elites.

Students looking for an alternative must consciously turn to the working class, the only social force capable of breaking the vise-like grip in which the tiny capitalist elite holds the world economy and of guaranteeing social rights for all. They must link the defense of education with the mobilization of the entire working class in a common struggle to defend jobs, decent wages and high-quality public services and for the establishment of a workers' government committed to reorganizing economic life on socialist lines, so that social needs, not the profits of a tiny few, will be the animating principle.

We urge students who agree with this perspective to read the *World Socialist Web Site*, and join and build the IYSSE.



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