

Quebec Liberals respond to student anti-austerity strike with repression and threats

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26 March 2015

With big business' full support, Quebec's Liberal government has responded to Monday's launch of an anti-austerity strike involving tens of thousands of students with police repression, threats and intimidation.

The ruling elite is determined to snuff out the threat of a militant student mobilization akin to that which convulsed Quebec for six months in 2012. Their greatest fear and concern is that the student protests could trigger an eruption of mass working-class struggle.

The anti-austerity strike has been timed to coincide with the expiry at the end of this month of contracts covering more than half a million provincial public sector workers, including hospital workers, nurses, public school and CEGEP (pre-university and technical college) teachers, school support staff and civil servants.

Philippe Couillard's Liberal government has demanded sweeping concessions from the public sector workers. These include a substantial cut in real wages over the life of a 5-year contract, an increase in the retirement age, other pension cuts, and increased workloads, such as bigger class sizes and an unremunerated two-hour lengthening of the workweek for teachers.

The government's punitive contract "offers" are part of a much wider austerity program that involves cutting billions from public and social services, increased electricity rates, daycare fees and other charges, and hikes in sales and other consumption taxes.

These measures are provoking mass opposition within the working class, resulting in nervous warnings from the province's unions that they may not be able to prevent defiance of a battery of anti-strike laws.

Seeking to draw a line in the sand, Education Minister François Blais issued a series of threats against the striking students on Tuesday.

This included a frontal attack on students' democratic right to boycott their classes.

Rejecting a call from the opposition Parti Québécois for the government to introduce legislation regulating when and how students can strike (along the lines of the labor laws that

are used to impede and frustrate worker job action), Blais said that there is no student right to strike. And this is true even if students have voted in favor of boycotting classes through associations recognized by their educational institutions and the government. The only right, and the one authorities must uphold, insisted Blais, is the "right" of students to attend classes.

"No one," declared Blais, "can stop another person from studying." He went on to deplore what he called a decades-long "confusion" over this issue in Quebec—a reference to the fact that student strikes have been a frequent and accepted form of democratic protest and struggle since the 1960s.

Based on his anti-democratic argument, which effectively criminalizes student strikes, Blais is urging universities and CEGEP administrators to ensure that students who want to attend classes can do so. "I am asking them, in the measure possible, to apply the existing rules, and if necessary sanctions."

The previous day, he had explicitly called for disciplinary action against pro-strike activists, saying that sanctions could be imposed at any time "against people implicated in the (strike) movement."

While the Education Minister has not said as much, his remarks also imply that educational institutions should threaten and discipline teachers who, in recognition of the fact that their students have voted to strike, cancel their classes.

Blais has also threatened to cancel the school term, saying that unlike in 2012 the government will not extend the school year to ensure students do not lose their semester. He justified this by claiming that the government does not have the money to pay for an extension.

Blais' provocative remarks were clearly meant as a signal to police to step up their repression of the striking students.

Police, including Montreal's notorious riot police, have repeatedly intervened in recent days to break up demonstrations, beginning with a march last Saturday called to support the anti-austerity strike set to begin two days later.

The police are using Montreal's P-6 bylaw as the pretext for violently suppressing the protests and making arrests. Patterned after a key element in the Quebec Liberal government's 2012 anti-student strike law (Bill 78), P-6 and similar bylaws that have been adopted by municipalities across Quebec empower police to declare "illegal" any demonstration whose itinerary they have not approved.

Even before Blais incited university and CEGEP administrations to sanction striking students, the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM) announced it plans to impose lengthy suspensions and in some cases expulsions on nine students for their alleged involvement in acts of vandalism and intimidation during student protests. Two of those targeted are elected student representatives. The threatened sanctions have been widely condemned by UQAM professors as a provocation.

In 2012 the Liberal government introduced Bill 78 to effectively criminalize the student strike when it was almost three months old. Now it is resorting to like measures from the get-go.

This is part of a much broader phenomenon. Governments across Canada are increasingly criminalizing social opposition. Canada's Conservative government has repeatedly illegalized strikes or threatened to do so and under Bill C-51 it is giving the national security apparatus vast new powers to spy on and "disrupt" threats to the government and big business.

In their hardline stance against the students, Couillard and his Liberals have taken encouragement from statements made by the heads of Quebec's principal labour federations ruling out any job action by public sector workers, let alone a working class challenge to the Couillard government, for six months or more.

"We have agreed that each of us will look after our own respective affairs," Quebec Federation of Labour president Daniel Boyer told *La Presse*. For her part, CSQ (Centrale des syndicats du Québec) President Louise Chabot said "the labour federations are nowhere near the point of a social strike."

As across Canada and around the world, the Quebec unions have for decades systematically suppressed the class struggle, imposing job and wage cuts while politically subordinating the working class to the big business, pro-Quebec independence Parti Québécois (PQ). In the name of preserving "social peace," they have torpedoed one mass worker struggle after another and have played an active role in elaborating and implementing the austerity program of the bourgeoisie, most infamously in 1996-98, when they endorsed the PQ's "zero deficit" strategy and proposed the early retirement program the Bouchard PQ government used to eliminate more than 40,000 health care and education

jobs.

The unions also played the principal role in the defeat of the 2012 Quebec student strike, which erupted over the government's plans to dramatically raise university tuition fees. First, they isolated the striking students in the face of mounting police violence. Then, when the Charest Liberal government's imposition of Bill 78 provoked mass opposition in the working class, raising the prospect of a situation akin to that in France in May-June 1968, the unions moved aggressively to shut the strike down and harness the opposition to the Liberals' austerity measures behind the election of a PQ government. This was exemplified in the QFL's slogan, "After the streets, to the ballot box."

With the support of the unions and the pseudo-left Québec Solidaire, the PQ won a minority government in the September 2012 election and promptly introduced social spending cuts even larger than those proposed by Charest, including hundreds of millions of dollars in cuts to post-secondary education along with annual tuition fee hikes.

In a statement issued to last Saturday's demonstration, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality and the Socialist Equality Party (Canada) welcomed students' attempt to initiate a wider struggle against the brutal austerity measures of the Couillard Liberal government, but warned that the pro-capitalist trade unions constitute the principal obstacle to mobilizing the working class.

The statement urged students and workers to reject the nationalist, protest perspective of ASSE (Association for Student-Union Solidarity) and the Spring 2015 committee and their orientation toward pressuring the union apparatuses. "Youth and workers," argued the statement, "should champion not a 'social strike'—a protest movement aimed at appealing to the Quebec elite. Rather they should fight to prepare a political general strike of the entire working class, in defiance of the anti-union laws, and with the aim of bringing down the Couillard government and making the struggle against austerity in Quebec the spearhead of a movement of the working class across Canada, and throughout North America, for workers' governments and the socialist reorganization of society."

The full statement can be read here: The Quebec student strike and the fight against austerity: A socialist perspective is necessary



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