

The Quebec student strike and the fight against austerity: A socialist perspective is necessary

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (Canada)
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The following statement, issued by the International Youth and Students for Social Equality and the Socialist Equality Party (Canada), was distributed at a demonstration in Montreal last Saturday organized to kick off a student strike in opposition to the austerity measures of Quebec's Liberal government.

The student strike set to begin March 23 reflects the deep anger in broad layers of the population at the pillaging of public services and the frontal assault on workers' rights and living standards.

The struggle initiated by the students expresses a desire for a unified response to capitalist austerity—the class program, not just of the Liberals of Philippe Couillard and the Conservatives of Stephen Harper, but of the whole ruling elite in North America and throughout the world.

But energy and combativeness are far from sufficient to guarantee victory. The students and their supporters are confronted with the necessity—if they want to avoid a defeat like in 2012—of adopting a political line diametrically opposed to that of the organizers of today's demonstration: ASSE (*Association pour une solidarité syndicale étudiante*/Association for Student-Union Solidarity) and the *Printemps* (Spring) 2015 committee.

Their militant speeches serve as a cover for a bankrupt politics of protest to the powers that be, subordination to the pro-capitalist unions, and narrow nationalism.

The failure of protest politics

Their protest politics is based on an idealist conception: that austerity is no more than an “ideological choice.” Under conditions of the deepest crisis of world capitalism since the Great Depression, they insist that it will be possible to pressure capitalist governments to adopt other measures than those that guarantee the ruling elite an uninterrupted flow of billions in profits—ferocious budget cuts, the slashing of taxes for the rich, the massive lowering of living standards for workers.

All the political parties that historically advocated national reformism (the British Labour Party, French Socialist Party, Canada's NDP, etc.) have embraced capitalist austerity over the past quarter-century—and this process has massively intensified

since the eruption of the global capitalist crisis in 2008. Whereas once the social-democratic and Stalinist parties held up the welfare state as proof capitalism could be “humanized,” now they preside over the levelling of what remains of public and social services.

According to the leaders of ASSE, all that is needed is to have enough people demonstrating in the streets and “shouting louder, so that no one can ignore us? (*“crier plus fort, pour que personne ne nous ignore.”*). But in 2012 the ruling elite proved more than deaf to the students' just demands. Its response was violent police repression and the use of the trade unions to isolate the student strike and politically harness it to the election of the Parti Québécois (PQ), big business's other governing party. For the Spring 2015 committees, though, the problem is that the students didn't shout loudly enough in 2012 and the great task of the hour is literally to...“howl.”

Lessons of the 2012 strike

By politically subordinating themselves to the pro-capitalist unions, the student leadership is turning the struggle against capitalist austerity over to the most hardened defenders of capitalism—the bureaucrats with six-figure salaries and privileges of all kind, and who control investment funds with billions of dollars invested in Quebec corporations.

For decades the unions have stifled and torpedoed all resistance by the rank and file to the anti-worker attacks of the ruling elite and have actively worked to impose the contract concessions (wage and job cuts, etc.) demanded by big business and the austerity measures demanded by the financial markets.

The most recent example was their intervention in the 2012 student strike. The unions isolated the students throughout the struggle. In their characteristic two-faced manner, the unions denounced Bill 78, while at the same time announcing that they would apply its provisions to the letter, including those that forced them to order CEGEP and university teachers to act as strikebreakers.

But when there was mass popular opposition to this antidemocratic law and the possibility arose that the student strike

might spread to the workers, the unions intervened to suppress it and to tie the opposition to the Liberals' austerity measures to the PQ, as exemplified by their call "From the streets, to the ballot box." Once in power, the PQ quickly implemented permanent university tuition fee hikes and budget cuts worse than those the preceding Liberal government of Jean Charest had sought to impose.

ASSE and the Spring 2015 committee today advocate the idea that the students can push these moribund bureaucratic apparatuses into "biting" the capitalist hand that feeds them so lavishly.

This dangerous illusion is belied by the whole past experience, not to mention statements by the main parties involved. "We have agreed that each of us will look after our own respective affairs," declared Quebec Federation of Labour President Daniel Boyer last week, when he joined the heads of the other union federations in ruling out any possibility that the half-million public sector workers whose contracts expire March 31 will join the striking students.

As so often in the past, the unions intend to keep the workers trapped in the straitjacket of collective bargaining. A legal strike—which the union officials invariably refer to as the "ultimate weapon" and which were it to be called would be quickly illegalized—has been put off to the fall, if not to 2016.

Greece and the bankruptcy of a nationalist opposition to the dictatorship of capital

As for the nationalism of the student leadership, it blocks the necessary turn of Quebec youth and workers to their most powerful allies—students and workers in the rest of Canada and the United States—and makes it impossible to draw any lessons from the social struggles taking place in the rest of the world, notably in Greece.

Since the financial crisis in 2008, the troika of the capitalist oligarchs (the IMF, EU and European Central Bank) has imposed on Greece a scorched-earth policy, devastating its economy and bringing about mass unemployment and the general impoverishment of working people. In this way, the troika has sought to set an example for the whole working class of Europe.

When in late January the Greek population elected a government supposedly against austerity, the international financial elite bluntly stated that they would not recognize the result and that the new Syriza (Coalition of the Radical Left) government must apply their program of social counterrevolution to the letter.

Faced with this predictable reply, Syriza, a party of the privileged middle classes that serves as a model for Québec Solidaire, abandoned all its election promises in record time and agreed to impose the severe austerity measures that it had claimed to oppose.

This is not because global capital cannot be fought, but because the national reformists of Syriza were implacably opposed to any challenge to capitalism and to any appeal to the working class of Europe, which has likewise been ravaged by austerity, for a

common struggle against the troika and for a Workers' Europe.

Prepare a political general strike

To students looking for a viable program on which to base the struggle against capitalist austerity, the IYSSE and Socialist Equality Party answer that another policy is possible and necessary—a socialist-internationalist policy based on the recognition that the profound objective contradictions wracking world capitalism can only find progressive resolution through the struggle for workers' power.

The claim of bourgeois governments the world over that there is "no money" for health care, education and other basic social needs is a lie. But these resources can only be mobilized if the stranglehold big business exercises over social-economic life is broken and the world economy radically reorganized so that production and technology serve human needs, not the profits of a tiny capitalist minority.

Only one social class has the capacity to realize this revolutionary transformation. That is the working class.

In the first instance, this class must mobilize as an independent political force, uniting its diverse struggles in defense of public services, wages and jobs in a vast counteroffensive of French, English and immigrant workers throughout Canada.

Youth and workers 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 antiunion 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 main obstacle to this path is the pro-capitalist union bureaucracy. The central task posed to the tens of thousands of students who will be on strike from March 23 is to support the workers in breaking out of the organizational and political straitjacket of the unions and taking the road of political struggle against capitalism.

Delegations of students must go to the subway stations, to workplaces and into working-class neighborhoods with the following message addressed to all workers: form rank-and-file committees independent of the unions, charged with mobilizing the working class against Couillard, Harper and the whole ruling elite, and fight for the independent political mobilization of the working class.



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