

Quebec education minister urges mass expulsions of striking students

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Quebec Education Minister François Blais has urged universities and CEGEPs (pre-university and technical colleges) hit by a student “anti-austerity” strike to expel two or three of the most militant students per day till the strike ends.

At a meeting Tuesday, Blais told the province’s university rectors to use their disciplinary powers to break the strike, including by systematic exemplary expulsions of strike leaders and others “who go too far.” Later he told a radio station, the rectors “can do this. If they (expel) two or three people per day, it will, I think, cool the ardor of others.”

Blais went on to compare the strikers, who are protesting sweeping austerity measures including massive social spending cuts and user-fee hikes, to children. In expelling some, “we’ll get the others to think,” said Blais. “We do that with children when we want to change their behaviour. ... We begin by saying there’ll be a punishment for what you said to your mother, etc. And then we make sure we carry that out.”

The next day, after a public outcry, Blais somewhat tempered his remarks. But there is strong support within Quebec’s elite for the government’s attempts to effectively criminalize the strike.

François Leagault, the head of the third party in the National Assembly, le Coalition Avenir Québec, or CAQ, defended Blais, while suggesting he hadn’t gone far enough. “I think there needs to be important penalties for students who stop other students from having access to their classes. So, it’s perhaps a poor formulation to target just two or three students.”

Also Wednesday, a Quebec Superior Court Judge issued an injunction at the request of the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM) forbidding five UQAM student associations and 34 of their members from trying to prevent students from attending their classes.

Police have repeatedly declared student demonstrations

illegal and made mass arrests since the “anti-austerity” strike was launched March 23. Quebec City Police arrested 274 demonstrators on the strike’s second day and in a brutal crackdown on a demonstration two days later shot a tear-gas canister point-blank into the face of an 18-year-old CEGEP student. Naomie Trudeau-Tremblay had to be hospitalized after losing consciousness and sustaining severe lacerations to her face. According to experts she is lucky to have escaped permanent injury and could even have been killed.

The Quebec Civil Liberties Union has joined numerous student, union and community groups in denouncing the police violence, which they note has been encouraged by statements from the mayor of Quebec City and City of Montreal authorities demanding “zero tolerance” of protests that do not adhere to anti-democratic bylaws that restrict the right to demonstrate.

Quebec’s political and business elite are determined to stamp out the student “anti-austerity” strike. Their greatest concern and fear is that the student protest could spark a mass mobilization of the working class

On Thursday, tens of thousands of students joined a demonstration in Montreal called by ASSE, the student group that led the 2012 Quebec-wide strike against massive university tuition fee hikes and whose member-associations have been spearheading the current anti-austerity strike.

Despite its radical rhetoric, the ASSE leadership played a major role in the ultimate defeat of the student strike. It limited the strike to a nationalist protest perspective aimed at pressuring the Liberal government, then led by Jean Charest; made no appeal to students and workers outside Quebec; bowed to the authority of the unions when they vehemently opposed its call for a broader protest movement involving limited worker job-action (a “social strike”); and assisted the unions in channeling the opposition to Charest behind the election of a right-wing

Parti Québécois (PQ) government.

Underscoring its subservience to the pro-capitalist unions, the ASSE leadership issued a call for a “strategic retreat” earlier this week, urging this weekend’s ASSE Congress to suspend the current strike. The ASSE leaders argue a “retreat” will facilitate the coordination of a student strike with public-sector worker job action in a mass anti-austerity movement in the fall.

In fact, the pro-capitalist unions have no intention of leading any working class challenge to the austerity program of Philippe Couillard’s Liberal government, either now, in the fall, or for that matter in 2016.

Claiming that Quebec must make dramatic changes to avoid a future “Greece-type” scenario, the Couillard government is demanding sweeping concessions from Quebec’s half-million public-sector workers. These include a five-year contract that will slash real wages, cut pensions, and increase the workload.

Everyone knows that the government will quickly legalize any public-sector strike and impose contracts by decree, as has been done repeatedly by Liberal and PQ governments for more than three decades.

Yet when the public-sector unions held a conference Tuesday to plan their strategy, they were quick to proclaim that their aim is “good-faith bargaining” with an extreme right-wing government that is already employing mass repression against striking students. “It’s all good to say that our collective agreements expire today [March 31],” declared Quebec Federation of Labour President Daniel Boyer, “but it’s not true we can launch [a strike] tomorrow morning. ... In any event our objective today is not to launch a strike, but to get the government to negotiate in good faith and that’s what everyone at our conference wants.”

Boyer’s comments were seconded by Confederation of National Trade Unions Vice President Francine Lévesque. “We’ll stick above all to the progress at the negotiating table,” said Lévesque. “Our goal is a good collective agreement.”

The unions have emphasized that they will follow to the letter all the legal obstacles Liberal and PQ governments have erected to any effective worker job action, including a lengthy mandatory conciliation process and draconian essential services legislation.

ASSE’s call to suspend the current strike has been criticized by the anarchist-influenced Spring 2015 Committee, a faction of the student protest movement. But like the ASSE leadership, it is entirely wedded to a nationalist protest perspective. It opposes any fight for the

independent political mobilization of the working class and an orientation toward workers in the rest of North America, claiming that if students and their supporters “howl” and “bite,” the elite will abandon its austerity program—no matter that the dismantling of public services and the destruction of workers’ social rights is the class strategy of the bourgeoisie across Canada and around the world.

As the Socialist Equality Party (Canada) explained in a statement last month, “the critical issue is the mobilization of the working class as an independent political force to impose its own socialist solution to the capitalist crisis.”

“Youth and workers,” declared 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 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.”

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



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