

The 2012 and 2015 Quebec student strikes and the bankruptcy of anarchism: Part 1

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10 December 2015

This is the first of a two-part series. The second and concluding part was posted here.

The harsh austerity measures imposed by the Quebec Liberal government have provoked great anger among workers and youth, fostering a wide-ranging discussion in which the lessons and significance of the 2012 Quebec student strike have become a major issue.

There is no doubt that the strike, which convulsed Quebec for six months and reverberated internationally, was a crucial political experience. In rejecting the Liberal government's university tuition fee hikes and fighting for the principle of free quality education for all, the students challenged capitalist austerity. At its height in May 2012, hundreds of thousands of students and workers were mobilized in defiance of the Liberals' draconian antistrike law (Bill 72/Law 12), raising the possibility and necessity of the strike becoming the catalyst for a mass working-class challenge to the big business assault on public and social services, jobs, and democratic rights.

But the political elements who are now holding up the 2012 strike as a model for the fight against the current Liberal government, including the trade unions, the student associations, numerous community groups and Québec Solidaire, are concealing the most critical fact: the movement was ultimately diverted by the union bureaucracy behind the election campaign of the Parti Québécois (PQ), a party of big business just as committed as the Liberals to imposing devastating social cuts.

The student organization that led the 2012 strike, CLASSE (The Broader Coalition of the Association for Student-Union Solidarity) greatly assisted in this betrayal. CLASSE advocated a protest politics focused on the single issue of tuition fee hikes. It embraced Quebec nationalism; refused to criticize the pro-capitalist trade unions as they isolated, then suppressed the strike; and rejected the fight to mobilize the working class as an independent social force in opposition to capitalist austerity.

Anarchists active within CLASSE and its leading committees criticized the "conciliationist" line of the majority of the CLASSE leadership and accused it of facilitating the "hijacking" of the strike in August 2012. The anarchists gave themselves radical airs by carrying out dramatic protests—including acts of "economic disruption" and skirmishes with the police—and by urging, as the government sought to reopen the strikebound universities and CEGEPs (pre-university and technical colleges) in August 2012, that students continue their "indefinite general strike."

But on all essential questions the anarchists' policy did not differ from that of the CLASSE leadership. They promoted a narrow Quebec nationalist perspective, likewise advocated futile appeals to the ruling elite, and expressed, if anything, a deeper pessimism and hostility towards the working class, which they broadly dismissed as consumerist, conformist and conservative, if not outright reactionary.

The book *On s'en câlisse: histoire profane de la grève-printemps 2012* (We Don't Give a Shit: An Irreverent History of the Strike—Spring 2012) casts light on the pernicious role of such conceptions. The book was written by the "Strike Collective," an anarchist group involved in the

strike.

The authors reject out of hand any possibility of understanding the strike as an objective social phenomenon expressing the class conflicts that run through and shape contemporary society. At the beginning of the book they make the claim: "The case of the Quebec Spring shows that the inclination toward uprising is not due to the threshold reached by austerity." That is "why we will be treating the 'logical' causes of the Quebec uprising only relatively briefly" (p.16).[1]

Having boasted of rejecting the "logical," that is to say, the objective causes of the movement, the authors set themselves the task of erasing all traces of the underlying socio-economic reality and class struggle.

They present Canada as a country "relatively unaffected by the economic crisis," with "a low unemployment rate," and Quebec as a province where "the absence of a crisis is coupled with a degree of political stability almost unrivaled in the world." To leave no doubt about their unshakable faith in the stability of the capitalist order, they add, "With no experience of war or tradition of resistance, the history of Quebec appears as a long calm river" (p. 30).

How then can we explain the student strike that mobilized hundreds of thousands of young people and rocked Quebec throughout much of 2012? According to the anarchist collective, the answer lies in the "subjectivity of Quebecers." "That identity caesura, (a people) between America and Europe, between English and French, between the colonizer and the colonized, was from all evidence the breach through which unprecedented political tendencies emerged in Quebec (p. 33).

In other words, the massive 2012 strike had no connection with the profound crisis of world capitalism—skyrocketing social inequality, sweeping violations of democratic rights, war and militarism—that resulted in revolutionary upheavals in Tunisia and Egypt in 2011, and mass movements against austerity worldwide.

Instead, the authors celebrate the 2012 strike as a breach in the "consumerist desert of English-speaking North America," that served to "revive one of the last remaining bastions of 'left-wing' nationalism" (p. 221).

These nationalist conceptions, according to which the Quebecois are—for purely subjective reasons—purportedly more "progressive" than the rest of North America, are an old lie trotted out by the Parti Québécois, the unions and the whole Quebec sovereignist (pro-independence) movement, including Québec Solidaire, to divide workers in Quebec from their class brothers and sisters in the rest of Canada and around the world.

This division of the working class is openly defended by the anarchist collective. They argue that on a federal level "Canadians have nothing in common" since "social and cultural realities occur mainly on the provincial level." From this claim, they conclude, "No wonder the strike in Quebec was not extended into other Canadian provinces" (p. 29).

In reality CLASSE, to say nothing of the other, more conservative student associations, the unions and the entire official Quebec "left," played a major role in confining the strike to Quebec. Although the strike

was closely followed by youth across Canada, the United States and overseas, neither the leaders of CLASSE nor their anarchist critics ever sought to expand the movement beyond Quebec's borders.[2]

The phony radicalism of “direct action”

Although they criticize the leadership of CLASSE for being too conciliatory toward the government, the anarchists adhere to the same protest perspective. They reject the fight for the independent political mobilization of the working class, accept the inviolability of the capitalist social order, and advocate noisy, disruptive and novel protests—many of them akin to publicity stunts—with a view to impressing and scandalizing the ruling elite so as to ultimately bring them to the negotiating table.

The book is full of praise for “the alliance that gives CLASSE its strength: the moderate elements benefit from the pressure exerted on those in power by direct action ... while the radical elements can use the unions as a cover without fear of denunciation” (p. 48).

But the Strike Collective is forced to admit that the protest movement came to an impasse in the face of the government's intransigence and readiness to employ the repressive state apparatus in pushing through its austerity program. “The faith of the student organizations in the balance of forces,” they write, “comes up against an unexpected strategy on the part of the government: deny everything, even evidence” (p. 87).

The response advocated by the anarchist elements within CLASSE, and vigorously defended by the Strike Collective in their book, was clashes with riot police and various acts of “economic disruption,” like blocking bridges and access to subway stations.

They enthusiastically recount a range of anarchist-led actions: “maNifestations,” where the participants paraded half-naked; “pirates vs. ninjas” demonstrations; “Operation Plague of Egypt”, where locusts were spread at a university business school that is a training ground for leading CEOs and politicians, etc. These pathetic gestures underscore the total lack of seriousness of the “revolutionary” anarchists. Accounts of them fill many of the book's 300 pages and are presented as a major contribution to the fight against austerity.

The anarchist collective writes: “the shocking refusal of the government to negotiate provides the needed impulse for the strikers to engage in more extreme actions” (p. 88). The authors describe with enormous enthusiasm how “several times, the Montreal Metro (subway) was partially immobilized by bricks or smoke bombs,” or how “non-lit Molotov cocktails were left in front of the office of the [then Education] Minister Line Beauchamp” (p. 91).

With great refinement, a sub-title, in capital letters, announces the goal: “NEGOTIATE, FOR CHRIST'S SAKE!” (a slogan on one of the demonstrations). The anarchist collective then elaborates the futile policy of pressure behind all these gestures: “It's no use governments repeating ad nauseam that they will never negotiate with violent factions; the fact remains that it is necessary to get on their nerves in order to get anything out of them” (p. 115).

The theatrical stunts of the anarchists aim to pressure the ruling elite and “push” the masses to action. Their outcome, however—as was amply demonstrated during the course of the student strike itself—is to sow confusion among the working class and youth, while providing a pretext for violent police repression.

The “direct action” of the anarchists is the opposite of the struggle for the political independence of the working class, the struggle to make the working class aware that the defense of its interests and the logic of its own struggle pose the need for it to forge its class unity and independence, win political power, and reorganize socio-economic life.

This struggle requires first and foremost the unmasking of the bourgeoisie's agents in the labor movement—above all, the trade union bureaucracy and social democracy. The anarchists' “rejection” of politics in favor of “radical,” diversionary gestures actually represents a definite type of politics—maintaining a complicit silence about the betrayals of the labor bureaucracies and covering up the fact that these betrayals are based on their defense of capitalism and the nation-state.

From this point of view, the anarchist current is part of the pseudo-left swamp, very active in Quebec Solidaire, whose main function is to provide a political cover for a privileged labor bureaucracy that is increasingly discredited in the eyes of workers.

Insofar as the anarchists criticize the unions, it is not because of their pro-capitalist and nationalist program, but their hierarchical structure. Organization and discipline, essential components of any mass struggle by workers conscious of their class interests, provoke in the anarchists a reflexive rejection that expresses their petty-bourgeois class viewpoint, based on extreme individualism.

In its historical development, as today, anarchism articulates the interests of sections of the petty bourgeoisie who find themselves marginalized by the development of large industry and trapped by more powerful social forces. This is the objective basis for their hostility to the working class and the political impotence behind their seemingly “radical” rhetoric.

The second and concluding part of this article will be published December 11.

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Notes:

1. Like many contemporary anarchists, the authors are strongly influenced by postmodernism, a subjective idealist philosophy developed in opposition to Marxism, which rejects science and denies any objective basis for knowledge. The book begins with this quote from Jean-François Lyotard, one of the principal exponents of postmodernism: “The only excuse that could be invoked for writing a book on the history of the movement [...] is that it not be a history book, liquidating the delirious, the unjustifiable, the passionate into a simple phenomenon to know...” [back]

2. This narrow nationalism is exemplified by the manifesto CLASSE published in July 2012. It presented the student strike, not as the expression in Quebec of an international movement against capitalist austerity, but as a democratic struggle of the “Quebec people.” (See: CLASSE manifesto promotes Quebec nationalism and protest politics) [back]



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