

The 2012 and 2015 Quebec student strikes and the bankruptcy of anarchism: Part 2

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This is the second and concluding part. Part One was published December 10.

Apologists for the union bureaucracy

On one of the few occasions that the Strike Collective mentions the political forces active during the 2012 Quebec student strike, they write: “In truth, the left parties and trade unions in Quebec did nothing grandiose either to encourage or to help this arrival on the scene of the plebs. Taken by surprise, they, as usual, tried to channel the enthusiasm of the movement the better to later deflect it from the street to the ballot box. The parties, organizations and unions, all too slow and too cautious compared to the movement, supported it only half-heartedly.”

This observation is discreetly relegated to a brief footnote at the bottom of page 197. No further detail or comment is provided, as if the role these forces played was of little importance. This also reflects the attitude of anarchists more generally: always keeping an eye open for the opportunity to collaborate with the trade union bureaucracy, an affluent pillar of the established order that for decades has stifled and sabotaged workers’ struggles.

The fact is that the unions, far from being “too slow and too cautious” in their support of the student strike, worked to isolate, then politically derail and suppress, it. Or to put it somewhat differently, the unions supported the strike like a rope supports a hanged man. In early May 2012, during negotiations with the government and the student associations, including CLASSE, the presidents of Quebec’s three main trade union federations bullied the latter into accepting a sellout agreement deal that was subsequently overwhelmingly rejected by the students.

Later that month, the unions responded to the adoption of the Liberals’ emergency antistrike law Bill 78, which effectively criminalized all antigovernment protests, by announcing that they would respect and enforce it. This included a stipulation that the unions had to do everything in their power to compel their members at the province’s universities and CEGEPs, i.e. teachers and support staff, to help break the student strike.

The unions then orchestrated a campaign to divert the strike movement and the broader opposition to Bill 78 behind the big-business Parti Québécois. This was epitomized in the Quebec Federation of Labour’s slogan “After the streets, the ballot box.”

In mid-May, as workers were joining the anti-Bill 78 protests en masse, FTQ President Michel Arsenault, it would subsequently be revealed, wrote the president of the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), Ken Georgetti, to demand that he instruct unions outside Quebec to give no support to the student strike. Arsenault’s letter is mentioned in the Strike Collective’s *Irreverent History of the Strike*, but again warrants just a footnote.

The silence of the anarchist collective on the treacherous role of the trade union bureaucrats goes hand in hand with another central tenet of anarchist politics: the rejection of the working class as an independent and revolutionary social force.

In general, the anarchists depict the working class, which they often equate with only unionized workers, as conformist, even reactionary. In its book, the Strike Collective dismisses the “majority” as “cowardly” and in favor of “unrestrained repression” against the students.

This is particularly evident in the section of the *Irreverent History* that deals with the debates in the summer of 2012 over how the strike should proceed. This was under conditions where the unions had forcefully intervened to prevent the strike from becoming the catalyst for a working-class upsurge and were working to channel the opposition to the Liberals’ austerity measures behind the PQ election and where the Charest government was preparing to use the draconian powers of Bill 78 to forcibly break the strike.

The Strike Collective makes criticisms of what it calls “the electoral wing” of the CLASSE leadership—that is, those politically closest to the union bureaucracy, which for decades has been a loyal PQ ally, and to Québec Solidaire, the ostensibly “left” pro-Quebec independence party that in June 2012 offered the PQ an electoral pact. It accuses CLASSE of “abandoning the strikers to a certain degree” and even speaks of the “treason” of CLASSE’s “electoral wing.”

But the fact is during this crucial period the anarchists limited themselves to calling for a louder and more aggressive broader protest, focusing on plans for beefed-up picket lines outside the strike-bound universities and CEGEPs. They raised not the slightest criticism of the political line of CLASSE. Not for conducting the strike as a single-issue protest against tuition fees hikes. Not for its close ties to the union bureaucracy and explicit defense of the FTQ after Arsenault’s letter to the CLC became public. Not for its nationalist appeals to the ruling elite. Nor for its refusal to turn to the working class and appeal to workers to join the students in a struggle against capitalist austerity.

In complete opposition to this political abstention, which contributed greatly to the movement’s defeat, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) fought from the outset for the understanding that only the mobilization of the working class could ensure the defense of education as a social right.

“The working class is the only force capable of offering a progressive alternative to the bankrupt capitalist system,” wrote the SEP in a statement dated 16 April 2012, “and it is to this force that students must turn in struggle. They must make their strike the catalyst for an offensive by the entire working class against the destruction of jobs and public services... A turn to the working class means above all the fight for its independent *class* political mobilization. This mobilization will be in opposition to the sclerotic union apparatuses and to the bourgeois political parties like the PQ and Québec Solidaire, and on the basis of the socialist program of social equality.”

The anarchists’ rejection of this orientation is rooted in their deep, petty

bourgeois skepticism towards the revolutionary potential of the working class. “If one assumes that revolutionary policy is by nature that of the minority,” declares the section of the Strike Collective’s *Irreverent History* that deals with the summer of 2012, “one is obliged to admit that on the other side of the barricades is the majority that is making war on it.” And a little further: “The longer the conflict progresses, the little people begin to find their voice and call for military repression” (p. 247).

The “solution” that the Strike Collective advances exemplifies the reactionary implications of the anarchists’ extreme subjectivism and their determined opposition to the struggle to cultivate a socialist class consciousness among the workers, which is the true meaning of their injunction: “No politics.”

The Strike Collective bemoans the fact that “the discourse of the left bases itself on pedagogical rhetoric. Its method of attracting support focuses on so-called ‘rational’ arguments.” They also express their admiration for “the right [that] does not bother so much with the rationality of its arguments: it considers that its very existence demonstrates the passionate emotional appeal of its politics” (p. 248).

This Collective then tries to cover up the implications of its promotion of an irrational politics, long the stock-in-trade of the right, especially the extreme right. “The success of the populist strategy should not lead us to adopt the same methods,” it declares. The previous passage, however, underscores the extent to which anarchism is inspired by the theories of voluntarism and glorification of individual action that gave philosophical and ideological sustenance to the fascist movements of the twentieth century.

Significantly a central theme of the *Irreverent History* is the need to revive and propagate the “myth of the general strike,” a conception that has a long history in the anarchist movement. First developed by the French philosopher George Sorel, from whom the fascist Italian dictator Mussolini drew inspiration, this “myth” is conceived of as a means of mobilizing the masses on the basis of an appeal to the emotions, without the need for a long and difficult process of political education based on reason—i.e. the fight for socialist consciousness.

The creation of a myth around the student strike in 2012 is the last thing young people and workers need. What is needed is to draw the essential political lessons concerning the nature of the capitalist state and its “democracy,” and the role of the various political forces that were at work: the trade unions and the NDP, which isolated the striking students; Québec Solidaire, the party of the pseudo-left that hews closely to the Parti Québécois; and the Parti Québécois itself, the alternate government party of Quebec big business. All these forces, with the help of CLASSE and the anarchists within it, played a key role in limiting the student rebellion in 2012 to a nationalist perspective of pressure politics before politically delivering it up to the PQ.

The Spring 2015 Committee

Having arrived at the end of this detailed critique of the anarchist ideas elaborated by the Strike Collective in its *Irreverent History*, it is instructive to ask how the student strike of 2012 would have developed had the anarchist current in CLASSE become the majority and assumed leadership of the strike.

To answer this question, we need to go forward three years to the spring of 2015, which saw the launching of another student strike under the aegis of CLASSE (which had now resumed its former name of the Association for Student Union Solidarity or ASSÉ), in the name of the fight against austerity and for the environment.

This time, unlike in 2012, the anarchists wielded decisive influence in

the ad hoc committee created to direct the strike, the Spring 2015 Committee, and played a major if not determining role in elaborating its political perspective and trajectory. And they put forward essentially the same pro-union and nationalist line as had the leadership of CLASSE in 2012, thereby directly contributing to the strike’s rapid defeat.

To the extent that the anarchists drew any lesson at all from 2012, it was that what was needed was a larger, more “muscular” protest movement, one in which the opponents of the government’s austerity agenda would have to “bite,” to use the elegant expression the anarchist themselves popularized during the strike.

But the central question was the same as in 2012: to what social forces should students turn in the struggle against capitalist austerity and on what program should they be mobilized?

As the Socialist Equality Party wrote this past spring in explaining the need for a radical transformation of society to protect and expand social rights: “Only one social class has the ability to perform this revolutionary transformation: the working class. [It] must be mobilized as an independent political force, uniting its various struggles for the defense of public services, wages and employment in a broad offensive of French, English and immigrant workers across Canada.”

Rejecting a turn to the working class in opposition to the pro-capitalist trade unions in 2015, just as CLASSE did in 2012, the anarchists explicitly turned to the trade union bureaucracy in the hope of pushing it to mount protests aimed at pressuring the Couillard Liberal government to drop or at least modify its austerity measures. This was the meaning of the anarchists’ call for a “social strike.”

Predictably, the government responded to the 2015 student strike as it had in 2012 with savage police repression. Indeed, the level of repression at the very beginning of the 2015 strike was akin to that reached at the height of the strike three years before.

While the students were bearing the brunt of the batons and rubber bullets of the police—which posed all the more the urgent need for an appeal to the workers to intervene as an independent political force—the anarchist groups were sowing illusions that the union bureaucracy would provide support for the movement. In fact the unions were openly hostile to the strike. They feared it would undermine their efforts to straitjacket the half-million provincial public sector workers whose contracts expired March 31 in a lengthy collective bargaining process designed to frustrate any genuine struggle.

The series of “initiatives” taken by the Spring 2015 Committee consisted of regular calls for “anti-austerity” protests in the streets of Montreal and other Quebec cities, many of them involving stunts aimed at generating press coverage. There was no attempt to reach out to workers at their places of work, let alone arm them with a socialist program. Bereft of any perspective beyond that of pressuring the government, these actions were quickly and severely suppressed by the police.

The conceptions defended by the Strike Collective and the Spring 2015 Committee reflect those defended, to varying degrees, by all anarchist groups: the exaltation of “direct action,” that is a more “radical” variant of protest politics, and virulent hostility to the socialist struggle for the political independence of the working class; the promotion of nationalism and various forms of identity politics; extreme individualism and a subjective approach to politics, including a steadfast refusal to objectively examine socioeconomic processes, the political trends at work and class interests; distrust, if not hostility to the working class, coupled with political subservience to the union bureaucracy and the promotion of students and other groups as the basis for an “oppositional,” purportedly anticapitalist politics; deep pessimism about the possibility of social progress.

This outlook is the perspective of demoralized, declassed elements of the petty bourgeoisie. In implacable opposition, the Socialist Equality Party, firmly rooted in the long tradition of the struggle for socialism,

bases its political orientation on the international working class. This class is the only social force whose class interests are bound up with and that has the power to overthrow capitalism and radically reorganize socioeconomic life based on collective ownership of finance and industry so that production can be organized to satisfy social needs, not enrich a tiny few.

The authors also recommend:

Political lessons of the Quebec student strike

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