

Ten years since the defeat of the Quebec student strike—Critical lessons for today

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This year marks the tenth anniversary of the powerful 2012 Quebec student strike. While its trigger was the provincial Liberal government's announcement of a massive increase in post-secondary tuition fees, objectively the strike was a challenge to the entire austerity agenda of the ruling class.

Launched in mid-February, the student strike would rally immense popular support, rock the province for six months and have profound implications for the class struggle across Canada.

At its peak in May 2012, hundreds of thousands, including ever wider sections of the working class, were joining anti-government protests animated by mass opposition to the corporate assault on public services, jobs and wages.

Subsequently, recognizing that the violent state repression it had deployed in the preceding months had not crushed the strike and restabilized the political situation, the provincial Liberal government of Jean Charest called an early Quebec election, for September 4, 2012.

This political maneuver depended above all on the complicity of the trade union bureaucracy and its political allies, Québec Solidaire and CLASSE, the student association leading the strike. Having worked from the beginning to isolate the students from the broader working class opposition to austerity, these forces directed all their efforts to delivering the *coup de grâce*—the sabotage of the student strike and its diversion into an electoral dead end.

Determined to put an end to the growing social opposition, the Quebec Federation of Labour (QFL), the province's largest labour federation, had already launched its watchword, "After the streets, the ballot box" in late May. As a false alternative to the Charest Liberals, the union leaders and their allies advanced the pro-Quebec independence Parti Québécois (PQ)—the Quebec ruling elite's alternate party of government since the 1970s and an equally fierce enemy of the working class and the striking students.

The subsequent electoral victory of the PQ, which expressed above all the immense popular opposition to the Charest government, was hailed by the student associations, the unions and their pseudo-left acolytes such as Fightback as the "victory" of the student strike, if not a great social advance.

It did not take long for this lie to be exposed. In the months following the strike, the Pauline Marois-led PQ government imposed its own post-secondary tuition hikes, as part of a new wave of austerity measures, and launched a virulent anti-Muslim agitation—a pattern that would be followed by a series of right-wing chauvinist governments in Quebec and across Canada.

In keeping with their longstanding suppression of the class struggle, the pro-capitalist unions intervened throughout the conflict to prevent the student strike from developing into a working class counteroffensive against capitalist austerity. Their smothering of this movement paved the way for the sharp right turn of the entire Canadian ruling elite in the decade that followed.

The strike's objective causes

The strike was launched by a bloc made up of two university and CEGEP (pre-university and technical college) student federations—respectively the *Fédération étudiante universitaire du Québec* (FEUQ) and the *Fédération étudiante collégiale du Québec* (FECQ)—that were closely aligned with the PQ, and CLASSE, which presented itself as the "radical" wing of the movement and quickly assumed the leadership.

The immediate objective of the vast student mobilization was to counter the massive university tuition fee hikes announced by the Charest government. But it constituted an implicit challenge to the austerity agenda and class strategy of the entire ruling class in Quebec and across Canada.

In the wake of the 2008-9 global financial crisis, the ruling class in Canada, as in all the other major imperialist powers, launched a massive austerity wave aimed at eviscerating what remained of public services and the social rights of the working class. Eliminating Quebec's decades-long university tuition freeze—an achievement of militant struggles, bound up with the working class upsurge of the 1960s and 1970s—was viewed as a key step in shifting politics sharply right. Hence, the Charest government's intransigence; its determination, with a view to intimidating the working class, to impose a demonstrable defeat on the students; and its readiness to employ state repression, including massive police violence, to crush the strike.

The students' struggle against the tuition fee hikes could only go forward as part of the broader working class opposition to the ruling class's frontal assault on education, health care and all public services. As the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) explained in the strike's earliest days in February 2021:

The student strike ... cannot succeed unless it becomes the spearhead of a vast counteroffensive of the entire working class. For this to happen, the strike must go beyond a mere protest over a single issue. Students must consciously turn towards the working class, the only social force capable of offering a progressive alternative to the capitalist system of private property and profit that condemns the overwhelming majority of society to rising unemployment, poverty, and economic insecurity.

Expanding on this point on April 16, 2012, we wrote:

A turn to the working class signifies, above all, a struggle for its mobilization as an independent political force. This mobilization

will only be realized in opposition to the sclerotic union bureaucracy and bourgeois political parties such as the PQ and Québec Solidaire, and on the basis of a socialist program for social equality.

Rejecting this perspective, the CLASSE leadership limited the strike to the issue of tuition fees and refused to appeal to or seek to mobilize the working class in Quebec, let alone the rest of Canada. Although the Charest government responded to the strike not with concessions but with tear gas and police truncheons, CLASSE maintained that all that was necessary was to “*crier plus fort pour que personne ne nous ignore*” (“shout louder so that no can one ignore us”)—in other words, to persist with a policy aimed at pressuring Quebec’s ruling elite in the hopes of obtaining a few crumbs.

CLASSE turned to the corporatist union bureaucracy, which it held up as the legitimate representative of the workers. Not surprisingly, the pro-capitalist unions immediately went into action to isolate the students from the working class and prepare the betrayal of their struggle.

The social explosion of May 2012 and the treachery of the unions

In early May, the presidents of Quebec’s three main trade union federations pressured student leaders to accept an agreement in principle that included most of the fee hikes demanded by the Liberal government. The student leaders, including CLASSE’s representatives, capitulated. But to the shock of the union leaders and the government, rank-and-file students rejected this sellout deal en masse.

It was at this time that the Charest government pushed through Bill 78 to criminalize the student strike. The repression that followed was intense—police violence, injunctions, mass arrests, kettling, etc.

Far from weakening the movement, this ferocious repression pushed the working class into action alongside the students. In mass demonstrations organized against the Charest government’s authoritarian measures, one often heard talk of a general strike.

Despite the overwhelming popular opposition, the unions announced that they would respect all of Bill 78 (Law 12)’s anti-democratic provisions. They instructed teachers and other university and college employees to report for work, thereby helping the government break the student strike.

QFL president Michel Arseneault then wrote to Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) President Ken Georgetti to demand unions outside Quebec not offer any support—not even a penny—to the striking students, adding that if they did so they would be violating Quebec’s “right to self-determination.” Enraged that the “most radical sections are calling for a social strike,” Arseneault stressed in his letter that “the best approach is to facilitate an agreement, not fan the flames.”

A few days later, the QFL launched its slogan, “After the streets, the ballot box.” Its goal was to end the strike by channeling it into electoral support for the PQ, the other governing party of the Quebec ruling class and a long-time political ally of the union bureaucracy.

This sabotage operation was facilitated by Québec Solidaire (QS)—a pseudo-left organization of the affluent middle class that has long been oriented towards the PQ and is now seeking to integrate itself further into the political establishment by reassuring it of its readiness to assume direct responsibility for imposing the social attacks demanded by the ruling class.

A few weeks after the QFL launched its infamous slogan, QS proposed, yet again, an electoral alliance with the PQ on the basis of a reactionary

nationalist program. In the explosive context of June 2012, this move was intended to give the PQ much needed “left” cover and the pro-capitalist unions vital political support in helping quell the growing sentiment among workers that they should join the students in struggle.

The role of the NDP

A particularly pernicious role was played by the social-democratic NDP. Historically supported by the unions in English Canada but with little influence in Quebec, the NDP had, to its own surprise, won a majority of Quebec’s seats in the May 2011 federal election, less than a year before the student strike.

Far from using its new position of authority in Quebec to rally support across Canada for the striking students, the NDP refused to offer them even verbal support, arguing that education is under provincial jurisdiction and that it wanted to focus its efforts on fighting Stephen Harper’s federal Conservative government. As if a political defeat for Charest wouldn’t also have been a crushing blow to Harper, who was carrying out the same austerity offensive and attacks on worker and democratic rights on a national scale.

The NDP’s mask of “neutrality” was torn off when the Harper government introduced a motion in the House of Commons calling for “recognition of the right of the Quebec National Assembly... to pass laws, such as Bill 78, within its jurisdiction.” After a harmless amendment, the NDP voted in favour of the Conservative motion. In other words, it refused to support Quebec students on the grounds that it was a provincial issue but did not hesitate to interfere in provincial politics when it came to justifying the repression of students.

The role of CLASSE

Being at the head of the 2012 movement, CLASSE and its leader at the time Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois—who has since become Québec Solidaire’s principal leader and nominee for Quebec premier—bear much of the responsibility for the defeat of the strike.

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Strongly influenced by postmodernism, Quebec nationalism, and petty-bourgeois conceptions about the environment and “consumer culture,” the CLASSE leadership brought together various political currents of the pseudo-left, including anarchists and other proponents of “direct action.”

For months, it argued that the student strike should be conducted as a single-issue protest movement. CLASSE deliberately separated opposition to tuition hikes from growing opposition to the austerity agenda imposed by ruling elites across Canada and internationally.

CLASSE promoted the lie that the union bureaucrats—not rank-and-file workers—were the true allies of the students in struggle. Even after the unions shamefully submitted to Bill 78, refusing to mobilize their hundreds of thousands of members in support of the students, and all but publicly demanded an end to the strike, CLASSE claimed that the unions “supported” the students “in good faith.” It went so far as to publicly endorse Arseneault, the QFL president, after his letter denouncing a “social strike” and opposing any support for the student strike from English Canada was made public.

In July, CLASSE published a manifesto that exposed the bankruptcy of its reformist and nationalist perspective. The manifesto contained no

mention of “capitalism” or of the working class. It presented the strike not as an expression in Quebec of growing opposition to austerity around the world, but rather as “a democratic movement of Quebecers.”

CLASSE then joined the campaign of the unions and Québec Solidaire in support of the PQ with its calls to “get rid of the neoliberals.” This phrase was aimed solely at the Quebec Liberal Party and was intended to disguise the PQ’s extensive right-wing and chauvinist record, including its imposition in the late 1990s of the deepest social cuts in the province’s history.

The role of the anarchists

A minority of anarchist elements within CLASSE condemned its leadership for scuttling the student strike in mid-August 2012, when the CEGEPs and universities, which the government had abruptly shut down as it adopted Bill 78, reopened to conclude the winter 2012 semester. Throughout the strike, these elements had called for more “forceful” actions: mass pickets, the blocking of bridges, disrupting the Montreal Grand Prix, etc.

But these “grand gestures” had nothing to do with mobilizing the working class. They were only designed to annoy commuters and “embarrass” the Charest government in the vain hope of extracting concessions from it. In keeping with the anarchist posture of “no politics,” these elements never sought to thwart the ongoing union-led efforts to channel the student struggle behind the PQ.

Unable to offer any program to broaden the student struggle by orienting it towards the fight to mobilize the working class as an independent political force, their only proposal in August 2012 was to confront the police by organizing more “assertive” picket lines in front of the colleges and universities. This proposal found no base of support because it had an adventurist character—one that betrayed the anarchists’ petty bourgeois hostility to the working class and skepticism as to its revolutionary capacities.

All this would be demonstrated again three years later, in 2015, when the contracts of more than half a million Quebec public sector workers expired. These workers were coming into struggle against the Liberal government of Philippe Couillard, which had succeeded Marois and her PQ, and launched a savage drive to slash public services and the working conditions of the workers who administer them.

The petty bourgeois anarchist forces organized in the Strike Steering Committee (*Collectif de débrayage*) and the Spring 2015 Committee pressured CLASSE into launching a new student strike based on a bankrupt political perspective—that this would push the unions to organize a mass mobilization against Couillard’s austerity measures.

But the unions were determined to nip in the bud any effort to revive a protest movement that represented, from their pro-capitalist point of view, an unacceptable threat to “social peace.” As a result, they gave the Couillard government a free hand to deploy the repressive arsenal of the state, from the riot police to the courts, to violently crush the short-lived 2015 student strike. Meanwhile, the union bureaucrats resorted to their usual tactics to isolate, demobilize and ultimately betray the public sector workers’ struggle. This created the conditions for the subsequent coming to power in Quebec City of the hard-right “Quebec First” Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ).

Lessons for today

Drawing the lessons of the defeat of the 2012 student strike is all the more crucial today as the international working class enters a new period of explosive struggles under the combined impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, NATO’s war against Russia in Ukraine, and a profound economic crisis that is throwing hundreds of millions into poverty around the world.

The fundamental issues raised ten years ago acquire an even more urgent character today: (i) the need for students to turn to the working class, the only social force capable of providing a progressive solution to the historical crisis of capitalism; (ii) the need to resolve the crisis of revolutionary leadership within the working class.

This requires a clear understanding of the reactionary role of the political forces—the unions, Québec Solidaire, the NDP, CLASSE and the anarchists—that isolated the 2012 student strike and prevented it from becoming the catalyst for a working class counteroffensive against austerity and capitalism.

The working class must reject the nationalist and pro-capitalist program of these forces. It must fight to unite all workers in Canada—French- and English-speaking and immigrant—in a common struggle with their class brothers and sisters in the US and overseas. This must be based on the socialist program of workers’ power and the reorganization of socio-economic life to make meeting social needs, not producing profits for the few, its animating principle.



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