

Workers must rally to the defense of Quebec's striking students

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The working class across Canada and internationally should come to the support of Quebec's striking students. For eleven weeks, tens of thousands of university and CEGEP (pre-university and technical college) students have been boycotting classes and staging demonstrations to oppose the provincial Liberal government's plan to raise university tuition fees by 75 percent over the next five years.

The government and state, with the full support of big business and the corporate media, have responded by attempting to criminalize the student strike.

The courts have issued numerous injunctions limiting, if not outright banning, student picket lines, and ordering universities and CEGEPs to proceed with normal instruction and evaluation if just one student wants to attend class.

Last week, the head of the largest university teachers' union accused the government of seeking to conscript its members into a campaign to break the strike by instructing university administrations to force instructors to give classes even when their students have repeatedly endorsed the strike. Describing scenes reminiscent of a police state, the president of the Quebec University Teachers Federation said police and a newly-expanded phalanx of university security guards are intimidating his members: "A climate of fear is being imposed on university campuses, something that was hitherto unimaginable and is absolutely unacceptable."

In a further attempt to break the strike, the Liberal government convened phony negotiations this week. True to the stand the government has taken throughout the strike, Education Minister Line Beauchamp flatly refused to discuss scrapping or even modifying the tuition fee increases. She pressed representatives of the three province-wide student associations to instead accept the broadening of access to a

government-backed student loan program, a program that is highly profitable to the country's banks.

Already, the average Quebec student is graduating with debts of more than \$15,000. Moreover, students in Quebec are acutely aware of the much higher debt-loads being incurred by students elsewhere in North America, particularly in the US, where tuition fees are even higher.

As the talks entered their third day, Beauchamp announced that the government was excluding the more militant of the three student associations from the talks. Among the pretexts she gave was that a student protest in Montreal had turned violent the night before. In fact, numerous eye-witnesses, including journalists, have claimed that the demonstration was peaceful until the police declared it an "illegal assembly" and set upon the students.

Over the course of the past two-and-a-half months, it has become standard practice for police to outlaw protests and attempt to terrorize students with pepper-spray, tear-gas and baton charges. This campaign of repression has been facilitated by the press, which has published lurid depictions of purported student violence, while censoring mention of the police violence. Some rightwing journalists have gone so far as to suggest the student strike is akin to terrorism.

The criminalization of popular opposition, especially the struggles of the working class, is becoming the norm in Canada as around the world. The federal Conservative government has repeatedly used emergency laws to break strikes and impose concessions, including on postal and Air Canada workers. Last fall, the municipal governments of Toronto, Vancouver, and many other major cities used court injunctions and police action to force an end to the "Occupy" protests.

The Quebec government and entire Canadian elite have been so implacable in their opposition to the Quebec student strike because they recognize that the students' opposition to the tuition fee hikes and their insistence that education should be a social right constitutes an implicit challenge to their entire class strategy.

Like their capitalist rivals in the US, Europe and Asia, Canada's ruling elite has responded to the global financial meltdown of 2008 by seeking to destroy what remains of the social gains won by the working class in the tumultuous social struggles of the last century. Governments at every level are imposing brutal austerity measures that target basic public services and social benefits, including education, health care and pensions.

Big business is adamant that the students must be defeated, so as to press forward with this class war agenda. Quebec's government "shouldn't give in or make any compromises," insists Montreal Chamber of Commerce President and CEO Michel Leblanc. What is at stake for the ruling class has been spelled out even more clearly on the pages of *La Presse*, the province's most influential daily. While a former editor wrote that the students must be defeated so as "break" the "mold" of "attachment to the status quo ... of acquired rights," the current editor declared that if the Liberal government were to relent before the students "there would no longer be the means to carry out any reform whatsoever in Quebec."

Far from mobilizing the working class in defence of the students, the unions and ostensible parties of the left are systematically isolating their struggle, so as to prevent it from becoming the catalyst for a broader movement of the working class against the austerity measures of the provincial Liberal and federal Conservative governments.

Indeed, in response to the deepening class polarization that the strike has occasioned, the unions are now urging the students to abandon their demand that the government scrap the tuition fee hikes. At the same time, they are intensifying their efforts to harness the student movement and the working class to the Parti Quebecois, a big business party that when last in office imposed massive social spending cuts.

"To save the semester and preserve social peace," to cite one union official, Quebec's unions are asking the

government to announce a one-year "moratorium" on the tuition hike so as to permit a "full-scale reflection" on the financing of universities.

The unions in the rest of Canada and Canada's social-democratic party, the NDP, have been silent on the repression directed against the Quebec students. As around the world, Canada's unions and social-democrats are not only sabotaging the resistance of the working class, they are directly imposing the austerity measures of the bourgeoisie. On Tuesday, the NDP, with the full support of the unions, facilitated the passage of an austerity budget in Ontario that cuts spending by \$17 billion over the next three years.

The Quebec students must not be left to fight alone. Their struggle's implicit opposition to the effort of the ruling class to impose the burden of the capitalist crisis on working people must become an explicit strategy—for the mobilization of the working class in Quebec and across Canada against the dismantling of public services and all job cuts and concessions.

Only the working class has the social power to secure and extend basic social rights so as to ensure a decent education and livelihood for all. This requires that the working class wage a political struggle to bring to power a workers' government that will reorganize socio-economic life along socialist lines, by placing the banks and basic industries under public ownership. Then production will be organized to fulfill social needs, not enrich the few.

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