

Quebec student union ASSE promotes trade unions as students vote for “anti-austerity” strike

By Richard Dufour
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Student associations representing more than 30,000 Quebec university and CEGEP (pre-university and technical college) students have voted to go on strike for at least two weeks, starting March 23, to oppose the Quebec Liberal government’s pillaging of public services.

Attained late last week, the 30,000-benchmark is significant because it was the agreed upon minimum level to trigger a province-wide student strike. In the coming days the numbers who will join the “anti-austerity” strike will swell, possibly significantly, as more than 100,000 other students are slated to vote on joining the walkout.

The *Association pour une solidarité syndicale étudiante* (Association for Student-Union Solidarity—ASSE) reacted with euphoria to the announcement that the strike trigger had been reached. “For us,” said spokesperson Camille Godbout, “it is a clear demonstration that we are building a broad social movement against austerity.”

But nothing suggests ASSE’s leaders have even begun to draw the lessons of the political derailing and defeat of the six-month strike Quebec students mounted in 2012 against university tuition fee hikes. ASSE (then known by the acronym CLASSE) itself contributed to that defeat. It limited the striking students to futile attempts to place pressure on the Liberal government; it promoted a Quebec nationalist viewpoint that excluded any appeal to students and workers in the rest of the country; and it helped the pro-capitalist trade unions channel the mass opposition to the Liberals and their austerity program behind the election of a big business Parti Québécois (PQ). Once in office, the PQ extended the austerity measures of its Liberal predecessor, including slashing funding for post-secondary education and imposing annual tuition fee hikes in perpetuity.

The pursuit of a similar policy this time would have far worse consequences, as Philippe Couillard’s Liberal government, following the example of Harper’s Conservatives and egged on by the entire corporate elite, is

slashing billions from social spending and imposing sweeping wage and pensions cuts, job losses and increased workloads on public sector workers.

However, ASSE stubbornly subscribes to the same failed nationalist protest perspective, hailing the coming two-week strike as a “means of exerting pressure to get the government to react in regards to its austerity policies.”

Popular anger over the anti-social measures of Couillard is growing, and workers and young people are impatient to begin a struggle to defend and expand public services. But ASSE continues to sow the illusion that angry protests will force the government to see reason as exemplified by its slogan *Crions, plus fort, pour que personne ne nous ignore* (Shout louder, so no one can ignore us!).

The breadth and ferocity of the austerity measures of the Couillard government are part of a new stage in the attempts of the ruling elite—not just in Quebec but across Canada, in the United States, and around the globe—to make workers pay for the world capitalist crisis.

This process, launched at the end of the 1970s, intensified in the following decades as big business repudiated the post-Second World War policy of relative class compromise in favor of class war. The financial collapse in 2008 was a decisive turning point, resulting in the greatest transfer of wealth in history. The trillions of dollars used to bail out the banks and “encourage growth” were rapidly swallowed up by the worldwide financial elite in record-level bonuses, dividends, and share prices. This same elite is now demanding that the gigantic holes this has left in public finances be filled by a vast impoverishment of workers throughout the world.

This is the social reality that is feeding the growing opposition, still politically inarticulate, to the Couillard government’s austerity measures. The student strike of 2012 was an expression of it. In 2015 this feeling is even stronger and, decisively, it is spreading and strengthening within the working class, the only social force with the power to

challenge big business' vice-like control over socioeconomic life, overthrow capitalism, and reorganize the economy to meet the social needs of the majority, not further enrich the few.

Even the pro-capitalist unions are forced to acknowledge the growing radicalization of the workers. "I have been asked by my members if I would be prepared to go to jail," complained Daniel Boyer, the president of the Quebec Federation of Labour (FTQ), the province's biggest union federation. "We have members who are ready to defy a return-to-work decree or an emergency (strikebreaking) law," he admitted.

But the union bureaucracies remain faithful to the treacherous role they have played for decades—imposing the concessions demanded by the ruling class by smothering and torpedoing workers' actions and social struggles. And they will do everything today to suppress and derail the mass opposition to the Couillard government.

The unions have already rejected the possibility of calling a strike this spring of the more than half million public sector workers whose contracts expire on April 1 and who confront draconian government concession demands. The union bureaucrats want to limit the "struggle" to a few protest gestures. At the same time, they continue to subordinate workers politically to their longtime ally, the PQ—a notorious enforcer of big business' austerity program and the political representative of the pro-Quebec independence wing of the bourgeoisie and to the capitalist state by their refusal to defy the anti-union laws, which serve to muzzle the opposition of the workers.

ASSE is putting the militant reputation it gained as a result of its role in the 2012 student strike at the disposal of the union bureaucracy, providing a "left" cover for the unions. It is a participant in various union-dominated coalitions—most notably the "Reject Austerity" collective—boosting the bureaucrats' authority and promoting the fraud that they speak on behalf of the working class. In reality, the unions are fully integrated into the capitalist establishment as attested by their participation in countless corporatist and tripartite committees (union-government-employer) and their control of investment funds worth billions of dollars that work hand in glove with the banks and employers to nurture profitable Quebec-based firms.

Last month's ASSE congress voted to hold "multiple mobilizations" including "intermittent or extendable strikes, other actions and demonstrations" to oppose the "neo-liberal" measures of the Couillard Liberal government. That decision has now found expression in the plans to launch a strike of at least two weeks beginning next week.

The popular support for the anti-austerity strike doubtless

does reflect a growing spirit of rebellion among young people against the Couillard government's austerity measures.

But ASSE's strategy is aimed above all at helping the unions contain and control the much more decisive opposition of the rank-and-file workers. In a direction paper submitted to the ASSE congress, the student union executive crassly justified the refusal of the unions to mobilize workers for a confrontation with the government by repeating the reactionary argument of the union bureaucrats that the workers are not ready to fight.

"If union members ever decide to launch a general strike, it is unlikely to be this spring," says the paper, in a reference to the half million public sector workers. For such a strike "can be particularly exhausting for the members and have demobilizing effects afterwards."

In an unequivocal gesture, the ASSE congress also rejected a motion that proposed that "no credibility" be given the *centrales syndicales* (FTQ and other major union federations) "since they have not voted for a strike this spring."

The political subordination to the unions takes a very concrete form. In an interview with *Le Devoir*, Renaud Poirier St-Pierre, a former member of CLASSE (the now defunct ASSE-led 2012 coalition) who now works for the Confederation of National Trade Unions, admitted that "in the union apparatuses, there are a lot of former veterans of the 2012 movement, in particular people from the executive of CLASSE.?"

A student strike can be the catalyst for a working class counteroffensive against austerity, but only if it is orientated toward the independent political mobilization of the working class in Quebec, across Canada, and internationally. In the first instance, this means fighting for workers to break free of the organizational and political stranglehold of the trade unions by setting up independent rank-and-file committees. These committees would have the task of preparing a political general strike to bring down the Couillard government and spearhead the mobilization of workers in the rest of Canada and the US in a united struggle against austerity and for the bringing to power of workers' governments.

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