

The Agitator

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SOLIDARITY WITH QUEBEC STUDENTS ON STRIKE

Now entering its fifth month, the student strike in Quebec has survived despite repression, bullying and worse, culminating in the draconian bill 78.

The bill is aimed at dividing the movement, undermining the right to protest, and permanently undermining the student right to strike.

The casserole demonstrations, a magnificent upsurge of public anger against Charest, his government and all of its excesses, an outpouring of exuberant energy aimed at denouncing bill 78.

In the past month, aside from the casseroles events, which multiplied, peaked, and have now settled into a steady rhythm, there have been a few key moments.

The most important development in the movement has been the commencement of regular public assemblies in neighbourhoods, often weekly, either before or after casseroles. In these neighbourhood assemblies can be seen the influence of the student movement, with its emphasis on direct democracy in stark contrast to the dictatorial approach taken by Charest and his Ministers.

Clearly the influence of the Occupy movement has been strong as well. In many cases these assemblies are places for people to voice their reasons for joining the protests. While small and relatively unfocused as yet, these meetings could eventually become centres of organizing as the movement progresses.

The highest profile event in the last month centred around protests against the Grand Prix



in Montreal. The student federations stated clearly they had no intention of preventing people from attending, only to deliver a message to the masses of people converging for the event. Despite this, police organized extremely repressive measures to control the flow of people through the subway system, establishing bases and posting dozens of offices at various metro stations.

Remarks by privileged rich boy race driver Jacques Villeneuve that students should "go back to school" backfired across the board, drawing criticism from protesters and mainstream media alike.

At the same time, two significant debates are raging among the left, progressives and people new to the movement.

Debates

First, discussion of a social strike, until recently only a peripheral phenomenon, has begun to gather momentum. La CLASSE has championed a social strike from the beginning, and so have some others, but the labour movement – and not just the high leadership – is pessimistic about being able to mobilize. Careful consideration will be needed to find ways to get that ball rolling, and roll it must if the movement is to have staying power.

That's because the other big question for everyone is the possible fall election. Renewed calls for a united strategy for anyone-but-Charest have received endorsement from over 500 people, among them some well-known figures from the en-

vironmental justice and labour movements as well as from the student strike.

Others, among them Quebec solidaire (QS), are clearly ranged against what they see as a passive and pessimistic response to a real concern: that Charest will be re-elected.

The fact is that Charest could be re-elected even with an electoral pact or strategic voting. The question for the left and for the movement is whether it makes sense in the long run to ally with the PQ in order to try to defeat them.

The PQ is a neoliberal ruling class party. An alliance with them, solely in order to defeat bill 78, is a deal with the devil. But mobilising is also a big challenge.

Next steps

Inside Quebec, activists will need to continue to take seriously the significant challenge of getting labour to move. Working through QS and from within unions and community groups, there is an opening, and those of us who can, need to take it.

Outside Quebec, activists in the rest of Canada should continue to fight their own governments against austerity. And, as much as possible, the call for donations to the CLASSE fund to oppose the bill should continue.

A sustained struggle can end the bill – maybe not via an election this fall, and maybe not through the courts, but in the long run in the best way possible: one that will see an ongoing transformation of the consciousness of Quebecers towards building a better Quebec and a better world.

Bill 78 and the attack on student unions

In all the justified outrage about Bill 78 and its attacks on freedom of expression, most accounts, in both French and English, have missed the main objective of the “special law”: attack, undermine and subdue student unions.

Beyond its draconian fines regime for not notifying police in advance, filing a route, over 50 people, etc, there are targeted and specific measures that, come August, will really put the strength of the student movement—and the depth of solidarity with it—to the test.

Forced compliance

The attacks on student unions and on the student right to strike in the law are both explicit and implicit. The impact on workers will also be considerable.

First, the law gives sweeping powers to the Minister of Education—allowing the government to change any legislation or law in order to enforce bill 78, on the Minister’s recommendation. The Minister can issue directives to institutions, which institutions are required to follow.

The law also requires people to police each other for compliance with the law. Anyone acting, or failing to try to stop others from acting, to “impede...instructional services or the performance...of work...or directly or indirectly contribute to slowing down...such work,” is in breach of the law.

The law also requires unions and student associations to “induce” their members to comply.

And agreements between administrations and unions representing staff need Ministerial approval.

The law requires employees to: “report for work according to their normal work schedule,” and “perform all duties...without any stoppage, slowdown, reduction or degradation of their normal activities.” In other words, this law bans the prac-

tice of respecting strike votes by profs by either cancelling classes or otherwise altering teaching in order to respect a strike vote.

Although legal strikes under the labour code are allowed, unions and their members and representatives cannot participate in “concerted action” pickets or other strike-related activities if those activities would disrupt normal teaching.

Attacks on student democracy

But the attack on student unions is even more direct.

If any impediment arises, institutions must describe the situation to the Minister including the name of the student union to which the “affected students” belong.

If the Minister believes the disruption is due to illegal action by a student union, the Minister can order the institution to stop collecting membership dues and evict the student union from freely provided space including furniture, notice boards, etc., for one term for every day of disruption.

The law negates any previously agreed-upon dues structure established by a student union for the duration of the time during which institutions are not collecting dues. A federation of associations such as FEUQ or La CLASSE can lose its membership dues when the Minister orders student unions to stop paying fees or making any financial contributions to the federation.

This undermines student unions’ internal democratic processes of referenda for dues increases, etc..

Further, the law makes employees unions, student unions and federations civilly liable for any damages suffered for any single or collective action that prevents anyone from attending classes or otherwise disrupts work. It also expressly allows class action lawsuits.



Mass fines

But where the rubber really hits the road is in the fines.

A single person can be fined \$1,000 to \$5,000 per day of disruption. However, the fine is \$7,000 to \$35,000 per day for officers and official representatives of unions, student unions and federations, or institutions, and “a natural person who is the organizer of a demonstration.” It is \$25,000 to \$125,000 per day for student unions and federations, employees unions, or “a legal person, a body or a group that is the organizer of a demonstration.” Fines are doubled for a second offence.

If an institution refuses to comply with a Minister’s order to withhold funds and space, they can be fined \$25,000 to \$125,000. So can any student union refusing to withhold dues or fees from a federation if ordered to do so by a Minister. And finally, anyone, no matter who, who helps or encourages anyone else to break the law is liable to fines of \$1000 to \$35,000 depending on the circumstances.

Solidarity and resistance

That’s why politics is also an essential part of this. Beyond the law suit against sections of the law, the government can only withstand so much pressure.

Outside Quebec the solidarity actions should continue. Groups and individuals, especially from unions, should continue to donate to the strike fund. They should let both the students and the labour movement in Quebec know they are doing so.

The unions in Quebec are under pressure right now to finally mobilize for a social strike. Unfortunately so far some of them are inclined to focus on the elections, while others merely seem pessimistic.

The pressure on them should continue. For a time, the unions might be able to defer payment of fines by appealing to the courts. But in the long run, for the student movement in Quebec to continue to play the magnificent role it has played up to now depends on our continued solidarity and our financial contributions, more important than ever.

How do we spread the student strike?

AN ONTARIO STUDENT STRIKE?

The Quebec student strike is inspiring people across Canada who would like to see a similar mass movement against austerity. But how do we spread the Quebec spring?

A Quebec-only phenomenon?

Some say the Quebec spring is unique, and Quebec certainly has its own particular conditions that are important to understand.

From the experience as an oppressed nation within the Canadian state, the people of Quebec have a strong history of resistance—including the biggest anti-globalization protests in 2002, the biggest anti-war protests in 2003, and the biggest May day protest in 2004.

Quebec students also have a tradition of mass strikes, most recently the 2005 strike that forced the government to give back \$103 million in cuts.

Printemps érable

That experience cannot be spontaneously summoned across English Canada, but that doesn't mean that the struggle can't spread.

The Quebec spring is a combination of past local experience along with inspiration from global revolt. That people in Quebec have called the strike wave the "printemps érable"—which means "Maple Spring" but which sounds like "Arab Spring"—shows the links with the global revolt. But how to spread it?

Struggle from below

Some are impatiently demanding that the leadership of the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS) simply call a strike, or arguing that radical students organize on their own—countering the radical group CLASSE with other student unions. But that ignores the way in which the Quebec student strike—and strikes in general—are built.

Hundreds of thousands of students didn't go on strike because CLASSE told them to. The strike wave was built from below since the end of last year, and CLASSE—which numbers in the tens of thousands—has built unity with the much bigger student unions, FECQ and FEUQ.

We can't turn our backs on mass student organizations or expect them to call a strike that has not been built from below (which would invite failure).

The CFS organized a pan-Canadian day of action against tuition fees on February 2 and occupied the Ontario Education Minister's office on April 5. If we want to spread the Quebec spring we need to learn the lessons and build a mass student movement from below, uniting with and strengthening the CFS.

LESSONS FROM FRANCE 1968?

-students
-workers

WHAT'S THE ROLE OF REVOLUTIONARIES

-united front

Activist calendar

International Socialists

LANGARA COLLEGE
vancouver.socialists@
gmail.com

YORK UNIVERSITY
yorksocialists@
gmail.com

UNIVERSITY OF OTTAWA
gosocialists@yahoo.ca

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
international.socialists@
utoronto.ca

Campaigns/movements

SOLIDARITY WITH THE QUEBEC STUDENT STRIKE

Join the March 13 day of solidarity with the Quebec student strike.

* ask your student union to support the strike

* join "solidarity with the Quebec student strike" facebook group and download petitions and motions to support the strike

* share the youtube video "solidarity with the Quebec student strike"

*visit www.stopthehike.ca to stay informed

* wear a red square, the symbol of the strike



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