

The Agitator

March 2012

SUPPORT QUEBEC'S STUDENT STRIKE

As we go to press, 125,000 striking Quebec university and college students have shut down their campuses to protest Quebec government plans to raise tuition fees by \$1,625 (a hike of 75 per cent) over the next five years.

They are motivated by some important past victories won through the determination and organization of the Quebec student movement.

From 1968 to 1990, tuition fees in Quebec were frozen at \$500 a year. After a hike of about 150 per cent from 1990 to 1993, a PQ government introduced a new freeze in 1994. But that same government opened the door to a new increase in the name of deficit cutting in 1996.

It faced a Quebec-wide student strike with mass street protests and gave up that idea. Fees have also increased by \$100 a year over the past five years under the Charest government.

Today's strike comes only seven years after the last one. In 2005, an unlimited student strike shut down nearly every post-secondary institution in Quebec to protest the cutting of \$103 million from bursaries to convert them into loans.

The students won, forcing the government to backtrack on a policy it had already passed.

That strike received massive public support and was the source of the "red square" badge, worn by thousands of students and supporters, which is also in use today.



Strike organization

The strike of 2005 was, like all student strikes in Quebec's history, organized through mass student assemblies to hold strike votes. In January and February of this year the strike was voted on in mass assemblies, faculty by faculty in some universities, and at colleges (CEGEPs) across Quebec.

Quebec students use a strike vote threshold approach (first used in the 1986 strike) to establish an official start of the strike on each campus. A threshold of 20,000 students in at least seven student unions and on at least three campuses was established for many student unions, and that threshold was met on

February 9. Strike votes have continued since then in other faculties and on other campuses, and other, more ambitious thresholds have been met and triggered additional walk-outs (for details, see bloquons-la-hausse.com).

But all of the walk-outs, no matter when they start, are unlimited (or renewable, usually every three days). So the ranks of the strike continue to grow, and will reach its height over the course of March.

The strike votes were initiated by the Coalition large de l'Association pour une solidarité syndicale étudiante (CLASSE), with over 40,000 members, but the strike will soon be joined

by members of the Fédération étudiante universitaire du Québec (FEUQ, which has 125,000 members) and the Fédération étudiante collégiale du Québec (FECQ, which has 80,000 members).

The Quebec elites are trying to defeat the strike: the government has called on teachers to cross the picket lines, the police have attacked demonstrations, and the media have tried to discredit the strike leaders. Meanwhile the media in English Canada is nearly silent, trying to hide this mass strike from the rest of Canada for fear of its inspiration spreading.

Solidarité

The success of all of the Quebec student strikes to date has involved not only walk-outs but public demonstrations of strength—whether it be picketing in front of campuses, staging mass demonstrations in the streets, launching sit-ins or occupations of the Ministry of Education and other government offices, and other direct action like street blockades.

We have a responsibility to show visible support outside Quebec for the students' struggle. There is a call for solidarity actions with the Quebec strike on March 13: contact your local student union and voice your support for some kind of action on that day. Our support could make a difference to the outcome, and a victory for Quebec students could inspire resistance across the country. (For more info see the back page).

Can we stop war on Iran?

There are a number of myths surrounding the looming war on Iran: that Iran has nuclear weapons, that it's the largest threat to peace, and that the only way to promote peace is through the West imposing sanctions and war. One of the most dangerous myths, however, is that we can do nothing to stop a war.

"People marched against the Iraq War and it went ahead anyways", people say, as if the anti-war movement accomplished nothing. But reviewing the history of the movement against the Iraq War provides valuable lessons to challenging the war on Iran.

US imperial ambitions

To gauge the impact of the movement we need to first consider the overall aims of the war. At the end of the Cold War, US planners were confronting a growing contradiction: the US had the largest military force in the world, but an economy in relative decline. As Henry Kissinger wrote:

"The end of the Cold War has created what some observers have called a 'unipolar' or 'one superpower' world. But the US is actually in no better position to dictate the global agenda unilaterally than it was at the beginning of the Cold War... The United States will face economic competition of a kind it never experienced during the Cold War. The domination of a single power of either Europe or Asia... remains a good definition of strategic danger to America... Such a grouping would have the capacity to outstrip America economically and, in the end, militarily."

After 9/11 the US moved quickly ahead with plans outlined by the right-wing think tank Project for a New American Century. Wars on Afghanistan and Iraq were to be light footprints, followed immediate-

ly with wars on Iran, Syria and beyond. In 2001 NATO invaded Afghanistan, and by the summer of 2002 it became obvious that Iraq would be the next target.

Anti-war movement debates

Global meetings and demonstrations began. In Canada, the G8 protests in Calgary provided the first meeting of groups across the country to plan out a strategy for the anti-war movement.

We needed to build the biggest and broadest movement against war, and faced a number of pitfalls. Some, like the leadership of the NDP, were initially only opposed to a US war but would support a war under the UN, like the first Gulf War.

Others believed we needed to equally condemn "Islamic fundamentalism" or the regime of Saddam Hussein and US imperialism, as if they were similar threats. This was the position of the French anti-war movement, whose slogan "neither Bush nor BinLaden" played into Islamophobia and paralyzed the movement.

Still others argued we had to not only oppose war but demand that the movement narrow itself to an explicitly anti-imperialist position, or oppose all wars and all occupations. This would have reduced the movement to a small core, preventing it from winning over others through the process of mobilizing.

Instead, the movement in Canada and most other countries adopted the position, "no war on Iraq"—which identified US imperialism as the greatest threat, opposed the war on principle (with or without the UN), and created the space for people to have other discussions along the way.

On this simple basis of unity, people were able to build a large and principled anti-war movement on campuses, workplaces and neighbourhoods.



Canadian anti-war timeline

The first demos raising opposition to the war were on August 6, 2002—the anniversary of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima—and were small but provided a base to build from.

When school started, campus coalitions emerged from coast to coast, and then city-wide coalitions. On November 17 there were demos that brought thousands into the streets from coast to coast, and then in January tens of thousands.

At the end of January, more than 500 students from 40 universities, colleges, high schools and CEGEPs converged in Toronto for a pan-Canadian student conference. This became the launching pad for March 5 day of strike and action on campuses, and a method to mobilize students for the February 15 demonstrations.

February 15, 2003 was the largest mobilization in human history, which united 30 million people across the globe—even on Antarctica. There were demonstrations in 70 cities and towns across Canada and Quebec, including 40,000 in Vancouver, 70,000 in Toronto and 100,000 in Montreal.

Still the Canadian government lobbied for war, with Prime Minister Jean Chretien pushing for a "Canadian compromise" that would delay the war for a month in order to give him time to get the UN on board.

Then on March 15, a quarter of a million people demonstrated in Montreal, thanks to a major trade union mobilization, and two days later Chretien said Canada would not join the war.

In other words, a campaign begun on campuses, which later involved workers, stopped Canada from going to war.

Assessment and prospects

The war did go ahead, and was a predictable catastrophe for the people of Iraq. But the global anti-war movement had a huge impact.

It isolated the US and emboldened resistance movements, creating a quagmire that has so far stopped the US from attacking Iran. In Europe the movement provoked a rift in NATO and forced Spain and Italy to withdraw, while forcing the Conservative party of Spain out of office. In Egypt, 30,000 occupied Tahrir Square, part of a growing wave of protests that converged in last year's revolution.

In Canada the movement was successful despite Parliamentary configuration: the Liberal majority supported war, the Tory minority supported war, and small NDP initially supported a UN war. But the movement won the NDP to a principled position, divided the Liberals and forced the government to say no to war.

Now the economic crisis and costly quagmires have increased the contradiction of US imperialism, and the Arab spring has both challenged US-backed dictators and shown that oppressed nations can liberate themselves. In Canada there is a larger NDP in Parliament with the potential of magnifying the anti-war movement.

We need to learn the lessons of 2003 and build a mass anti-war movement in campuses, neighbourhoods and workplaces. Regardless of the faults of the Iranian regime we need a principled opposition to war, which can connect with Harper and his austerity agenda. "No war on Iran", "Drop Harper, not bombs", and "Peace & Prosperity, not war & austerity."

Jesse McLaren, Toronto

Peace and prosperity, not war and austerity

BC teachers strike

As we go to press, BC teachers are on limited strike action and receiving solidarity from high school students in opposition to the government's attack on education standards and union rights.

On February 28, Education Minister George Abbott introduced a bill, that if it is passed will impose a cooling off period until September. It seems that legislating an end to bargaining is only one objective.

The bill allows the Education minister to appoint a mediator who is required to meet the net-zero mandate, and is also required to reach agreement on many of the governments concessions. In addition to imposing a two year wage freeze, it also stops teachers from bargaining class size and staffing levels. It also introduces stiff penalties for illegal strike action of up to \$475 per day for teachers, \$2,500 per day for union officers and a minimum of \$1.3 million per day from the union itself.

This is very scary indeed—perhaps a move à la Scott Walker, the Republican governor of Wisconsin who made similar attacks on US teachers.

This bill is appalling. It is an affront to the right to free collective bargaining, the rights of employees to job security and due process rights, and the rights of children to a quality education in reasonable classroom conditions.

BC teachers have been without a contract since June, and have been conducting limited job action since September, refusing to meet with administrators, supervise playground activities or prepare report cards. A recent poll found that a majority of BC residents support the teachers, and say that job action has not damaged classroom performance.

Tara Ehrcke, Victoria

STOP THE WAR OF 2012: DON'T ATTACK IRAN

On February 23 a rally was organized to protest the looming war with Iran and the possibility of Canadian participation.

More than 60 protesters gathered at the Human Rights Monument in the City of Ottawa and marched toward the Chateau Laurier where the Conference on defence and security was taking place. Key elements of the global military-industrial complex such as the Harper government and military commanders from Canada, the UK and the US converged on Ottawa for their annual general meeting.

The anti-war rally organized under the slogan of "Peace and Prosperity not War and Austerity" was an occasion for Canadians to fight back against the Harper government's attempt to militarize Canada at the detriment of more pressing social and environmental issues.

The March took the protesters to the doorsteps of the conference at Chateau Laurier for a mass die-in. Although this was the first Don't Attack Iran rally of the year, the protesters promised that they will continue their fight against the war machine in order to prevent a repetition of the Iraq debacle and the possible destabilisation of the entire region.

On the weekend of March 3-4 anti-war rallies also took place, as Harper was meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu to give his support for war. In Toronto hundreds marched despite the cold, with placards reading "Support Iranian people, by not bombing them", and "Drop Harper, not bombs". We need to spread these actions to stop the war.

Deka Omar, Ottawa

Tidal wave of solidarity with Rio Tinto workers

Since they were brutally locked out by Rio Tinto Alcan (RTA) on December 30, 780 workers in Alma, Québec have been building a global wave of solidarity against a ruthless employer.

The workers, members of Steelworkers local 9490, were locked out 24 hours before their collective agreement expired. A hundred and fifty security guards—many of whom spoke no French—kicked the workers out, not even allowing those who had been exposed to toxic beryllium to decontaminate themselves before being forced out.

The fight at RTA's Alma plant is about contracting out. The company wants to move two-thirds of the 780 jobs to sub-contractors, who will be paid half of what the current employees receive. About 200 scabs are currently running the plant at about one-third capacity, and the company has obtained an injunction against picketing.

The workers said "No" to contracting out, in defence of decent jobs for the region and for the future. And they have been spreading the message far and wide—and gaining inspiring support.

So-so-so, solidarité

Workers from ABI in Bécancour, from US Steel in Hamilton, from RTA's port installations and from its operations in Kitimat, BC have pledged support. At a general meeting, the workers at the Rio Tinto plant in Kitimat voted to give \$60,000 per month to the Alma workers until their own contract with Rio Tinto comes up for renewal in July.

Union president Marc Maltais

and several other workers at the Alma plant began a world tour to build support, from Los Angeles to Utah, and from Australia to Europe.

In Québec, they have joined striking students in Montreal and visited iron and titanium workers in Sorel-Tracy.

They have received support from different federal and provincial MPs, but have yet to hear from anyone from Québec's Liberal government. So on February 23 they demonstrated outside a speech Prime Minister Jean Charest was giving at the convention centre in Jonquière, where they denounced the government's failure to act in support of the locked out workers.

They also held a minute of silence to symbolically bury the credibility of RTA communications flak Claudine Gagnon, who has been busy concocting false allegations of vandalism against the locked-out workers.

Steelworkers from Toronto went to Alma on March 5 to deliver solidarity and to show their support.

On March 31, the locked-out RTA workers will host a global day of action in Alma. Los Angeles longshore workers have already pledged to send 11 members, and support is building across Québec for this show of solidarity.

The support being generated by the strong determination of the Alma workers is reminiscent of the movement that developed around the strike by Inco miners in 1978. This fight deserves the support of every trade unionist in this country. Workers have taken punishing losses in recent fights at US Steel, Vale Inco, Electro-Motive and elsewhere.

If these workers are given the means to outlast and out-organize RTA, whose Alma plant is one of the most profitable plants it owns, then workers everywhere will gain.

Michelle Robidoux, Toronto

Activist calendar

International Socialists

LANGARA COLLEGE
vancouver.socialists@gmail.com

Tabling: Wednesdays 11am
in the foyer of A-building

MALCOLM X
Wednesday March 7, 12:30



YORK UNIVERSITY
yorksocialists@gmail.com

Tabling Wednesdays 1:00pm
Student Centre entrance

**CHE GUEVARA: THE MAN
BEHIND THE MASK**
Life, politics and legacy of Che
Wednesday March 14, 6pm
311C Student Centre



**FREE FILM SCREENING:
THE SHOCK DOCTRINE**
followed by discussion
Wednesday March 21
311C Student Centre

UNIVERSITY OF OTTAWA
gosocialists@yahoo.ca
Club meetings thursdays
6:30pm in room UCU 301

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
international.socialists@utoronto.ca

**EDUCATION UNDER
CAPITALISM: WHY DOES
SCHOOLS SUCK?**
Wednesday March 14, 5pm
Bahen Centre, 40 St. George

**SOLIDARITY WITH QUEBEC
WORKERS**
Report-back from the Rio
Tinto picket line
Tuesday March 20, 7pm
Bahen Centre, 40 St. George



**STOP THE WAR OF 2012:
DON'T ATTACK IRAN**
Wednesday March 28, 5pm
Bahen Centre, 40 St. George

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

ISRAELI APARTHEID WEEK
Different dates and events for
different cities around
the world
Visit apartheidweek.org for
more details



(wear a red square
to show your support
for the Quebec
student strike)

Socialist Worker

A monthly revolutionary anti-capitalist
newspaper of the International Socialists

web:
www.socialistworkercanada.com
phone: 416.972.6391

To subscribe to Socialist Worker, please send
a cheque or money order made payable to
"Socialist Worker". Prices per year (CAD
dollars): Regular subscription: \$30; Institu-
tions, First Class delivery and U.S.: \$50;
Other international: \$60. Mail to:

Socialist Worker
P.O. Box 339, Station E
Toronto, ON M6H 4E3

The Agitator



*read
write
resist*

Join the International Socialists

To fight for a world without
oppression, imperialism and war,
join the International Socialists

Contact us by email:
iscanada@on.aibn.com

Or visit us at
www.socialistworkercanada.com