

Massive demonstrations support Quebec students striking against fee hikes

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Tens of thousands of students and their supporters marched in major Quebec cities yesterday, March 18, in opposition to the Charest government's promise to impose a 75% increase in post-secondary education fees over the next five years. In Montréal some 30,000 "former, present and future university students" responded to the call of the Coalition large de l'Association pour une solidarité syndicale étudiante (CLASSE). [1] The march stretched for more than 1.5 kilometres, according to *Le Devoir*. Thousands more marched in Quebec City, Sherbrooke and Alma.

This week, more than 200,000 university and college students will be striking throughout Quebec, and their ranks continue to swell. The strike began four weeks ago on some campuses. While the main demand is of course to stop the proposed hike in fees, many of the students support the demand of the CLASSE, which is spearheading the strike movement, for free post-secondary education.

This message — that education is an integral right of Quebec society, and must be accessible to all — has struck a responsive chord among broad layers of the population. In recent days, the students' demands have inspired strong messages of solidarity from their professors, more than 1,600 of whom have signed a powerful statement against neoliberal "commodification" of education and the privatization of university funding. [2]

Thousands of parents are now organizing through Facebook in support of the students, and many participated with their children in the marches yesterday. High school students are joining in, with strikes planned in several schools this week. The major trade-union centrals have issued calls for solidarity with the striking students.

The government continues to stonewall the student demands, and Finance Minister Raymond Bachand is expected to confirm the increase in his budget speech tomorrow. The increase will boost student fees by \$325 a year for five years. Yesterday's demonstrations were a prelude to even bigger student protests planned for March 22. And the organizers are already planning further actions in weeks ahead.

In recent weeks, student demonstrators have faced violent attacks by police using tear gas, sound percussion guns and rubber bullets, and hundreds have been arrested. In one such attack, a Montréal student was hit in the face and may lose sight in one eye. But this repression has, if anything, aroused mass indignation and public expressions of support for the students.

As the business media never cease to remind us, Quebec university fees are the lowest in Canada. But that is because Quebec students have mobilized repeatedly against attempts to raise them. As Chantal Sundaram notes in *Socialist Worker*:

"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.”

The strike has been organized faculty by faculty through mass assemblies and democratic votes of the students; it began in mid-February when the CLASSE threshold of a pro-strike vote of 20,000 students in at least seven student unions was met. At first, Education Minister Line Beauchamp dismissed it, claiming the movement represented only 2% of the province’s 495,000 post-secondary students. But already more than 40% of the total student population are on strike.

And now other student organizations, traditionally less militant than the CLASSE, are planning their own actions to protest the fee increase. For example, the Fédération étudiante collégiale du Québec (FECQ) has announced it will hold a sit-in at the National Assembly on March 20 when the finance minister tables his budget.

The 2005 student strike ended with serious divisions in the movement; the CLASSE predecessor was sidelined and in the end the government negotiated only with the FECQ and a rival organization, the Fédération étudiante universitaire du Québec (FEUQ). At the outset of this year’s strike movement, the CLASSE had only 40,000 members, while the FEUQ boasted 125,000 and the FECQ 80,000. However, the relationship of forces within the student population may be changing rapidly in the current mobilizations.

“There is something in the air,” 21-year-old CLASSE leader Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois told *Le Devoir*. That’s why people are mobilizing so much.”. “There is momentum. The Arab Spring, the indignés, the Occupy movement.... There is an entire discourse being advanced about the interests the governments serve. They do not work for the majority. And the question of the increased education fees is a stunning demonstration of this.”

According to another CLASSE spokesperson, Jeanne Reynolds, “It is a whole vision of education that is changing.

And indeed, an important feature of the movement is the attractive appeal of the CLASSE demand not only for a freeze on fees, but for free university education as a right of society. Other organizations have advanced similar demands for treating social services as a public right, not an opportunity for private profit. In a statement coinciding with yesterday’s marches, the Coalition opposée à la tarification et à la privatisation des services publics [3] called for public participation in the students’ actions and opposition to the Charest government’s increase in electricity rates and its tax on medicare services. “Although the Charest government is so far showing its rigidity, it is our impression that the relationship of forces is increasingly in the students’ camp,” Coalition spokesman François Saillant told the media. Saillant is also a leading member of Québec solidaire, Quebec’s party of the left.

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P.S.

* From <http://lifeonleft.blogspot.ca/2012/03/massive-demonstrations-support-quebec.html>

Footnotes

[1] An English translation: "Broad coalition of the Association for student union solidarity."

[2] See the professors' statement translated on ESSF (article 24635), ['We are all students.'](#)
[Quebec profs issue call for unlimited general strike of campuses.](#)

[3] In English, Coalition against fee-for-service and the privatization of public services.