

# Massive student upsurge fuels major debates in Quebec society

Tuesday 24 April 2012, by [FIDLER Richard](#) (Date first published: 23 April 2012).

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A crowd estimated at 250,000 people or more wound its way through Montréal April 22 in Quebec's largest ever Earth Day march. They raised many demands: an end to tar sands and shale gas development, opposition to the Quebec government's Plan Nord mining expansion, support for radical measures to protect ecosystems, and other causes. And many wore the red felt square symbolizing support to the province's students fighting the Liberal government's 75 percent increase in post-secondary education fees over the next five years. The Earth Day march was the largest mobilization to date in a mounting wave of citizen protest throughout the province.

In the vanguard have been the students, now in the eleventh week of a strike that has effectively shut down Quebec's universities and junior colleges. In recent days they have battled court injunctions and mounting police repression. Their resilience has astonished many Québécois and inspired strong statements of support from broad layers of the population. [1] Equally surprising to many has been the government's stubborn refusal to even discuss the fee hike with student representatives.

Addressing the huge crowd assembled at the foot of Mount Royal, student leader Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois answered the taunts against the students by Premier Jean Charest and his deputy, Education Minister Line Beauchamp:

*"In recent days they have been calling Quebec students hoodlums, vandals, violent people. That's false! What is more violent than selling the lands of indigenous peoples to some multinationals? What is more violent than polluting the air that our children are going to breathe? We are not violent, it is they who are violent!"*

## The crunch

The student strike — the longest in Quebec history — is now in a crucial phase. If it continues for more than a few days, an entire semester will be sacrificed by the students. Yet the strike has held firm. There are still more than 170,000 students boycotting classes and they are now being joined by some high school students. [2] The movement has been sustained by frequent mass assemblies and debates as well as off-campus mobilizations. On March 22, more than 200,000 students and supporters marched through the streets of Montréal while throughout Quebec some 300,000

students struck their campuses [3].

Although the police have kept a low profile in the largest student actions, they have been emboldened by the government's intransigence and the complicity of courts and academic authorities. During the past week, the cops have viciously attacked peaceful student demonstrations and arrested hundreds. Popular reactions in talk shows and letters to the editor indicate that many citizens are shocked at the repression, especially in regions outside the Montréal metropolitan area.

In Gatineau — a city adjacent to Ottawa, the federal capital — some dissident students at the regional campus of the Université du Québec (UQO) got a superior court judge to issue an injunction ordering professors to resume normal classes and barring student pickets within 25 metres of the university facilities. On April 18, I joined about 200 students, professors and supporters protesting the injunction. After demonstrating in front of the main campus, we marched peacefully (albeit noisily) through city streets, heading toward a secondary UQO campus less than two kilometres distant. Suddenly the municipal police tactical squad closed in, surrounded us and kept us “kettled” in close formation for a couple of hours before arresting more than 160 of us. We are being charged with “obstructing traffic” — although it was the police who closed off the road!

The next day, a similar demonstration, joined now by supporters bussed in from Montréal, was attacked at various points by the provincial police riot squad using pepper spray and truncheons. After leading the cops on a cat-and-mouse march through the city streets, some students found an unlocked door in a university building, entered and peacefully occupied the cafeteria. The cops swarmed in and stood in battle array along the walls. The students remained calm in the face of this intimidating spectacle. They observed a moment of silence and then held an hour-long free discussion on reforming the Quebec education system. The police then announced that they would be charged with “public mischief,” a serious criminal offense. In all, some 150 students and supporters were arrested that day.

The police occupation of campuses, as in Gatineau, is unprecedented and has shocked the academic community, resulting in several public statements of protest from professors and their unions. And even non-striking students have increasingly objected to the intimidating presence of police and massive private security forces on some campuses, including the University of Montréal.

### **A united front**

Despite the provocation from government leaders and the cops, and the vitriolic verbal attacks on the students from much of the mass media — and notwithstanding a few minor incidents of attacks on property by a few unidentified agitators — the students have displayed a remarkably astute ability to remain united and strategically focused on the broader issues in their struggle.

When Education Minister Line Beauchamp, under mounting popular pressure, grudgingly offered to meet with student leaders (but not to discuss the fees increase), she ruled out meeting with the largest of the three groups, the CLASSE. [4] Her pretext? CLASSE leaders had not denounced violent attacks allegedly committed by a few students, including an incident in which her constituency office was invaded, staffers assaulted and some furnishings destroyed. Leaders of the other two federations [5] refused to meet with the minister in the absence of the CLASSE, and pointed out that under the CLASSE's democratic structure and procedures, its leaders had no mandate to issue such a denunciation pending a decision by its weekly congress to do so.

This common front of the student organizations was a major change from the previous student strike, in 2005, when the two more conservative federations had abandoned the CLASSE

predecessor, the CASSÉE, [6] and bargained an agreement with the minister that was subsequently criticized by many students, not just CASSÉE supporters, as grossly inadequate. In part, the change this year reflects the much greater weight of the CLASSE, the most militant wing of the movement, in the strike. It now represents about one half of the strikers, and has provided much of the political leadership for the movement as a whole.

(At the regular weekly congress of the CLASSE leadership, April 22, the delegates adopted a resolution “denouncing any deliberate physical violence toward individuals,” while reaffirming their support of actions of civil disobedience such as occupations of parliamentary deputies’ offices or blockages of certain sites such as bridges, roads, etc. In doing so, they effectively called the minister’s bluff. At this point she has not responded.)

### **A ‘débat de société’**

The CLASSE began preparing for the strike early in 2011, publishing several issues during the year of an on-line tabloid journal, *Ultimatum*, containing detailed, well-argued articles on the issues and extensive reports on local activities. Each issue, up to 44 pages at one point, included reports on the popular upsurges in the Middle East and elsewhere internationally, with an emphasis on the leading role of students and youth. The Occupy movement was prominently covered. When the strike began in February of this year, *Ultimatum* switched to a two-page format issued almost weekly with updates on the strike’s progress.

Largely thanks to CLASSE’s intervention the strike has managed to move the public debate onto the students’ terrain, raising basic questions about the role of public education and its importance to the whole of Quebec society as a collective service that should be financed out of general government revenues, not on the backs of students as “consumers.” Thus, while the strike movement’s immediate goal is to “block the increase” in fees, the students have successfully placed the campaign in the context of an ongoing fight for *la gratuité scolaire*, free and universal access to post-secondary education. As the students argue, this remains a still unrealized objective of Quebec’s “Quiet Revolution” of the 1960s.

The students’ case has been endorsed by the eminent sociologist Guy Rocher, a member of the Quebec government-appointed Parent commission in the 1960s that laid the basis for a massive overhaul of the province’s educational system, proposing an end to church control of the schools and the creation of a vast network of post-secondary educational institutions. In an interview published in *Le Devoir* [7], Rocher described free education as a “societal choice” that would cost only 1% of the Quebec budget. And the Parent commission, he recalled, said free post-secondary education was “desirable in the long term” and even proposed that the neediest students be given a salary while they studied.

In fact, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, to which Canada is a signatory, provides that “Higher education shall be made equally accessible to all, on the basis of capacity, by every appropriate means, and in particular by the progressive introduction of free education” (Article 13(2)(c) [8]).

Aware that even stopping the current hike in fees requires a popular mobilization larger than what the students themselves can achieve, the CLASSE has called for creation of a broad united front of protest against the neoliberal offensive and linked the fees increase to a string of recent regressive measures. A statement issued for the April 14 march, “For a Quebec Spring,” stated:

*“Cuts in social programs, lower taxes for corporations, record military expenditures, setbacks to*

*women's rights, massive layoffs, inaction on factory closings, raising the retirement threshold to 67 years, increase in education fees, imposition of the healthcare tax, increased electricity rates... The list of Liberal and Conservative injustices is a long one."*

From a speech by CLASSE co-spokesman Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois

### **Where are the unions?**

And indeed, the students' appeals have been supported by a wide array of organizations in civil society. The full list, regularly updated, can be found at the web site 1625\$ de hausse, ça ne passe pas [9]. But while all three trade-union centrals support the students and favour free education, they have so far failed to back their rhetoric with economic action – not even the one-day general strike in solidarity with the students promised by the CSN. A petition urging such action by the unions is now gathering mounting support [10]. It urges the union leaders to speak out forcefully, to organize a “national mobilization, beginning perhaps with a one-day symbolic general strike across Quebec” and, if that proves insufficient to defeat the fee hike, to follow it up with stronger solidarity actions.

Meanwhile, the right-wing voices in the mass media — especially in English Canada — are becoming increasingly shrill in their attacks on the students. A case in point was a diatribe by Postmedia columnist Andrew Coyne [11], a regular member of CBC-TV's “At Issue” panel, which the state television network presents as intelligent commentary on questions of the day. In an April 21 newspaper column, Coyne described the Quebec students as a “self-serving, self-satisfied, self-dramatizing collection of idiots,” and went on to propose that instead of paying the present 17% of the total cost of their education the students should pay the full tab — through a graduated tax on subsequent income! Such is the logic of the neoliberal “user pays” principle.

### **And the funding?**

There is, of course, no truth whatever in claims that there is not enough money in current government budgets to support free education at all levels. The point was made quite compellingly in a statement by Cap sur l'indépendance, a network of groups agitating for an independent Quebec. It contrasted the projected revenues from the fee hike, \$250 million, with the following documented unnecessary expenditures, among others:

- Annual cost of Canadian monarchy: \$49 million (Monarchist League of Canada, 2011)
- Harper's financing of oil companies since 2009: \$3.5 billion (Suzuki Foundation, 2012)
- Tax evasion of the five biggest Canadian banks (1993-2007): \$16 billion (Lauzon and Hasbani, 2008)
- Canada's climate debt under Kyoto as of December 31, 2012: \$19 billion (*Le Devoir*)
- Canadian military expenditures (2007-08): \$490 billion (Canada First Defence Strategy, 2008)

In fact, a single F-35 fighter plane (\$482 million, according to the Auditor-General) would largely suffice to fund the re-investment in post-secondary education that Premier Jean Charest wants students to pay.

As Cap sur l'indépendance notes, all of the above are expenditures under the federal regime. No

doubt many other needless expenses — and new revenue sources — could be found within Quebec government budgets. But it would be easier to tackle those in an independent Quebec, “in which we could flourish in all areas, starting with education.”

However, the major independentist party, the Parti Québécois, does not support free post-secondary education. Several weeks into the student strike, the PQ leadership promised only a freeze on student fees if elected — now a real possibility in the forthcoming general election, judging from opinion polls. Only the pro-independence left party, Québec solidaire, is solidly behind the demand for *la gratuité scolaire*.

**Richard Fidler**

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**P.S.**

\* Posted Monday, April 23, 2012:

<http://lifeonleft.blogspot.ca/2012/04/massive-student-upsurge-fuels-major.html>

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## Footnotes

[1] For an important statement early in the strike, see the appeal by Quebec post-secondary teachers.

[2] A list of associations voting for unlimited general strike can be found here.

[3] See on ESSF (article 24967), [Quebec students show the way forward with massive Montréal protest](#).

[4] CLASSE stands for Coalition Large de l'Association pour une Solidarité Syndicale Étudiante, the Broad coalition of the Association for student union solidarity. Its web site explains that the CLASSE is “a temporary union type of organization comprising close to 100,000 members in many college and university student associations throughout Quebec. It represents the continuity of a current that for 40 years has made the student movement a ubiquitous actor in Quebec society and a major agent of social progress in education.” (The web site also contains materials in English; see the upper right corner.)

[5] These are the Fédération Universitaire du Québec (FEUQ) and the Fédération Étudiante Collégiale du Québec (FECQ).

[6] Coalition de l'Association pour une Solidarité Syndicale Étudiante Élargie (CASSÉE).

[7] See on ESSF (article 24969), [Québec : La gratuité de l'université - Autopsie d'un principe perdu](#).

[8] <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/cescr.htm>

[9] <http://1625canepassepas.ca/>

[10] <http://www.lettre-aux-syndicats.info/>

[11] <http://fullcomment.nationalpost.com/2012/04/20/andrew-coyne-overhauling-how-students-pay-for-education/>