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Quebec Students' Strike

A battle won, a struggle that must continue

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After a strike of more than seven weeks and an agreement concluded with the government, for a large part of the Quebec student movement it is time to draw a balance sheet.

Having been launched on February 24th by the student organizations that make up the CASSEE coalition [1], the strike ended with a growing radicalisation of Quebec youth and with the government backing down on some points. Since coming to power, on April 14th 2003, the government of Jean Charest [2] has sought to lower taxes to levels comparable with those pertaining in the United States and in English-speaking Canada.

[https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/quebec_students.jpg]

This obsession for tax cuts delights the Quebec Employers' Council, but it can only be implemented by cuts in the budgets of several ministries. The Ministry of Education doesn't escape this logic of tax cuts. So, in order to make economies in education the government imposed a reform, the Financial Aid to Studies (AFE) involving,, among other things, a reduction of 103 million Canadian dollars [3] a year of the budget devoted to student grants, a programme of linking student debt rebates to performance, a programme of repayment proportional to income and a long-term project of abolishing student grants. On top of all that there is a reform that seeks to link the college network to private enterprise and to decentralise it [4].

It is the whole of this reform that provoked the opposition of the ASSE [5]. On the side of the FEUQ and the FECQ [6] the student demands were pretty much focused around a single partial and defensive demand: the withdrawal of the government measure that would transform grants into loans and allow the government to save 103 million dollars.

So, autumn was the time for the three student regroupments to prepare their strategy with a view to making the government back down. Whereas the FEUQ and the FECQ were preparing their members to defend the 103 million dollars, the ASSE was developing a strategy that was broad and political, and that was capable of leading to a debate in Quebec society. An important stage on the road to the strike was passed in January when the ASSE and independent student organizations founded the CASSEE. That was a qualitative leap that enabled the new coalition to double its forces.

In the beginning the CASSEE was conceived of as a temporary structure, articulated around ASSE, with the aim of having a democratic coordination of the strike. Qualitatively, the CASSEE took the debate forward by proposing a platform of demands in three points:

- 1) complete abolition of the reform of the AFE (and not only of the 103 million dollar cut in the budget);
- 2) The scrapping of all projects of decentralizing the college network or of linking it to the market;
- 3) All this within a perspective of free education and of the elimination of student debt.

Thanks to this platform, the debate was launched on the place and the function of education in Quebec society.

The eighth student strike

The first student associations, for the most part members of the CASSEE, held general strike assemblies in the second and third weeks of February. And that's how on 24th February 2005 the eighth unlimited student general strike was launched. It is worth remembering that the student strikes of 1968, 1974, 1978, 1986 and 1996 were real victories that resulted among other things in the creation of a network of public universities [7], the introduction of

improvements in the system of student loans and grants, the freezing of education fees at college and university level.

The 1988 strike was characterized as a partial victory for the student movement that succeeded in stopping a reform of the AFE, but didn't make the government back down on all points. As for the student strike of 1990, it was the worst defeat in the history of the Quebec student movement, the government succeeding in increasing education fees by 140 per cent [8]

When the unlimited strike was launched on 24th February 2005 nothing indicated that it would become not only the longest, but also the biggest student strike in Quebec history, surpassing even 1974 [9] In reality, on February 24th it was the associations that were members of the CASSEE that launched the unlimited strike on the basis of the coalition's demands and without consulting the FEUQ and the FECQ.

Already, at the end of January the Student Assembly of Quebec (AEQ) had shown that it was impossible to create a national strike coordination that could regroup the members of the FEUQ, the FECQ the CASSEE and the associations that remained independent. In spite of the fact that since the AEQ assembly in January the various student regroupments were no longer speaking to each other, the FECQ fell into step by also launching a strike at the beginning of March. Seeing that the government wasn't budging, on March 8th, for the first time in its history, the FEUQ also launched a strike call, around the demand for the return of the 103 million dollars. So in spite of the division of the movement, the strike grew in strength.

The red square

From the end of February the CASSEE drew the attention of the population to student debt by popularising the red square, to signify that the students were "squarely in the red". The red square quickly became the symbol of support for the students' demands and of opposition to the policies of the Liberal Party government. The spring of 2005 will go down in history as the spring of the red square! The symbol in question was worn by hundreds of thousands of people. In the form of cloth, paper, paint, etc., it spread like wildfire throughout Quebec. It became the symbol that brought together the discontent that was growing among Quebec's people towards their government, which was maintaining its course of neo-liberal reforms. With this symbol the CASSEE carried off a masterstroke, by letting everyone show that the student movement had attracted a broad capital of sympathy among the population. The red square succeeded in transcending differences, so much so that the FECQ and the FEUQ also adopted it as the symbol of the student struggle. From now on the demonstrations against the neo-liberal policies of the government of Jean Charest will take place under the sign of the red square, whatever unions people may be members of. The symbol succeeded in creating some unity in the movement, even though the different regroupments had fundamental disagreements.

One of the first negative effects of the division of the student movement lay in the fact that the FEUQ and the FECQ negotiated alone with the government. The CASSEE was excluded from the negotiating table by Jean-Marc Fournier, the new Minister of Education, who didn't want the coalition, which he considered too radical and too "violent". Since the contacts between the CASSEE and the FEUQ and the FECQ were at a standstill, the two federations decided from the start of the strike to take part in the negotiations in spite of the coalition being excluded from the negotiating table. Fournier took full advantage of this division, which allowed him not to concede too much to the student movement.

It was by playing the card of the moderation of the two federations that on March 15th Fournier made his first offer, in which he promised to restore 41 million Canadian dollars [10] of the 103 millions that he had cut from student grants.

This offer was considered as completely ridiculous, both by the FEUQ and the FECQ and by the CASSEE.

The arrogance of the Liberal government acted as a spur to the movement. The following day, 250,000 students were on strike. The same day, nearly 100,000 people demonstrated in Montreal, denouncing Fournier's proposal. The discontent was so strong that it was no longer only the most militant student organizations that took to the streets. Although it didn't launch an unlimited strike, the School of Management Sciences of the University of Quebec in Montreal went on strike for a week, opening the way to one-day strikes at the School of Higher Commercial Studies, the National School of Public Administration, the Polytechnic and McGill University.

When Fournier made his second offer on April 1st, the student associations who had started the movement had already been on strike for five weeks. This time the government had to retreat on several points. While not totally abolishing the reform of the AFE, the government abandoned debt repayment proportional to income, the programme of rebates on student debt linked to performance and also had to abandon its long-term project of abolishing student grants. All that, plus the fact that the programme of student grants would get its 103 million dollars back from the year 2006-2007 onwards. To do this the Quebec government went looking for money from the federal government.

A struggle that has to continue

This offer was not unanimously approved by the student movement. The FEUQ and the FECQ agreed both to end the strike and to accept the offer, whereas the CASSEE, while deciding to end the strike, didn't accept the offer. In reality, Fournier's offer was problematic on several levels. In order to reach an agreement the student movement has lost 103 million dollars for the school year 2004-2005, plus 33 million for 2005-2006. That means that students have fought so that those who will study between 2006 and 2010 can have 103 million dollars in student grants. Another problem with this agreement is that the article of the reform of the AFE which concerns the sums allocated to loans and grants will have to be renegotiated each year to take account of inflation. Finally, the money coming from the federal government is welcome, but it allows the Quebec government to maintain its tax cuts and its neo-liberal policies. The fact that the CASSEE wasn't present at the negotiating table explains why the FEUQ and the FECQ didn't push to get the whole 103 million dollars for the years 2004-2005 and 2005-2006. So the struggle is far from over.

The student movement has forced the government to retreat. Now it must take advantage of that to build links with the other dynamic forces in society in order to continue the struggle against neo-liberalism. This student strike has led to a radicalisation of young people. In the days following the end of the strike, the FEUQ was faced with sharp criticism from its rank and file. Several student associations have called assemblies to disaffiliate from the FEUQ. The FEUQ tail-ended this strike movement, only taking part in it because it was forced to and not engaging in a political debate, remaining simply at the economic level. Following the strike, the student left can only be built outside the FEUQ, in order to be able to take the debate further, towards the organization of a broad-based conference on education, and to continue the fight against neo-liberalism.

The CASSEE will have to open up more widely to the associations that have been radicalised in the course of this strike. It must not fall back on the hard core that ASSE was at the beginning of 2005. The CASSEE has a political platform and a platform of demands that can enable the student left to face the future with hope. Will it have the will to develop a patient long-term strategy so that this platform can be implemented? That is the question that is posed before the student left from now on. The ASSE will have to structure itself in order to become a mass, democratic student organization, firmly anchored on the left.

[1] Coalition of the Association for broader student union solidarity: the radical wing of the Quebec student movement.

[2] Leader of the Liberal Party and Prime minister of Quebec.

[3] About 64 million euros.

[4] In Quebec the college network is made up of Colleges of General and Professional Education ((CEGEP) which are attended by young people (generally between 17 and 20) who have finished secondary school and who are either taking a course in technical education or preparing to go to university.

[5] Association for student union solidarity: the association that initiated the CASSEE.

[6] The moderate wing of the Quebec student movement. FEUQ: University Students Union of Quebec. FECQ: College Students' Union of Quebec.

[7] The network of the University of Quebec, which now has universities in several regions of Quebec.

[8] The defeat in 1990 can be partly explained by the disappearance of the National Association of Students of Quebec (ANEEQ) which had been formed after the 1974 strike. After the disappearance of the ANEEQ, there was no longer any united association of the Quebec student movement..

[9] The 1974 strike lasted for four weeks, with three quarters of the college network and a large part of the universities on unlimited strike..

[10] About 26 million euros.