

# QUEBEC PROTEST MOVEMENT: Charest Wants to Transform Quebec Into a “Right-to-Study State”

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*Maintaining the increase in tuition fees, suspending courses and disqualifying student organizations. With its special law, the text of which is unknown at time of writing, the Charest government continues its effort to integrate Quebec universities in the world university network in accordance with the neoliberal principles of the Bologna process, and transform Quebec into a “Right-to-study state” on the model of the “Right-to-work states” of the southern United States.*

In the agreement of last May 6, now obsolete, the minister Courchene slyly introduced, in article 2, the creation of a Permanent Universities Council with a mandate to examine “in light of the best practices” such topics as “abolition and creation of programs, internationalization, partnerships between the universities and the communities, continuing education, the quality of training, research, support and university bodies.”

Close observers of the universities saw in this clause – which has no obvious link to the issue of tuition fees – a desire by the government to comply with the Bologna process. The latter derives its name from a conference held in Bologna in June 1999 in which 29 European countries signed a document that envisaged the creation of a European common space for higher education.

This process is divided into three major reforms. First, standardize studies into three cycles. Second, establish a single system for calculating university credits that are transferable between institutions. Third, institute quality assurance, under the management of agencies external to the universities.

In Quebec, the first two reforms are already in place, apart from the non-compliance of the CEGEP network, hence the repeated calls for its abolition – most recently from the CAQ of Sirois-Legault – and its restructuring on the model of the “colleges” in English Canada.[\[13\]](#)

In Europe, this reform, which is modelled on the American universities, presents education as a personal investment. It is accompanied by a substantial increase in tuition fees, with repayment proportional to income: exactly the measures put forward by the Charest government.

In this big global market, education is an industry and the universities are enterprises fiercely competing to attract international students. The Conférence des recteurs et des principaux des universités du Québec (CREPUQ) has identified, among its priority objectives, the need to “increase the resources to attract foreign students.”

Unsurprisingly, in the middle of the current conflict, the rectors of our universities did not

hesitate to go to Brazil to recruit students. The Brazilian government has just announced that more than 100,000 Brazilian students will attend foreign universities over the next four years, at the expense of their government. Canada plans to attract 12,000 and the Quebec universities want “their fair share” of this windfall.

The international market in foreign students is expanding rapidly. In 2008, 3.3 million students were educated in countries other than their own. This is a 154% increase over a five-year period. And of course there is a strong demand for courses in English, which explains the inauguration of courses in English by the University of Montréal, its business school the HEC and even UQAM, the Montréal campus of the University of Quebec.

In Quebec, the number of international students has risen from 9,135 in 2003 to 26,191 in 2010. Today, in the Quebec universities, close to one student in ten is an international student. For the Quebec universities and government, the international students “pay” much more than Quebec students, if we make an exception for students from France or other countries with which Quebec has agreements.

Overall, the university fees demanded of foreign students are about seven times higher than those paid by Quebec students. So why not replace Quebec students, ousted by the hike in tuition fees, with students from other countries?

But the fees paid by the international students, even subsidized, do not cover the actual costs of many courses such as medicine, engineering, etc. So we subsidize, through our taxes, a portion of the costs of these students, most of whom will return to their countries at the end of their studies.

Of course, there are other financial advantages for the host countries in accepting international students. They have to be housed, clothed, fed, entertained, etc. But the question is posed: Do these economic spinoffs and the tuition fees they cover compensate for the amount of the subsidy we pay to them?

The presence of international students is, to be sure, a source of cultural enrichment and Quebec has a duty, as a rich country, to welcome students from poor countries. We already have agreements with these countries that codify the disinterested assistance we give them.

However, the current market in international students is something else. It has all the characteristics of an industry and it illustrates perfectly the commodifying of education in the epoch of globalization. Evidently, the Charest government gives precedence to positioning our universities in the global hall of fame over the schooling of the Québécois.

Unfortunately for it, and fortunately for us, the students do not see it that way. Through their courageous and determined struggle against the tuition fee hike they are challenging the very foundations of this liberal vision of education.

For the government, the issue goes beyond the amount of the tuition fees. Thus it resorts to a special law in which primacy is given to individual rights over collective rights, in which a student’s “right to study” prevails over the collective decision of a student assembly.

This is exactly the situation experienced by workers and unions in the so-called right to work states, those former slave states in the South, where collective agreements are illegal and

the unions are condemned to operate in the underground. Is that the fate that awaits the student organizations?

The fight against neoliberalism has its specific national features. In Quebec, it proceeds through national independence. That alone has the potential to shake the structures of domination, to liberate the creative forces, and to be the leaven of social transformation at the level of North America.

That the Charest government is attacking the right to association should be no surprise to us. There is a lock-out at the Rio Tinto Alma plant because the government opened the door to contracting out with the amendments to section 45 of the Labour Code in 2003. It let the company violate the spirit of the anti-scab law through the hiring of numerous management personnel prior to the conflict, and it allows Hydro-Québec to purchase the kilowatts of electricity freed up by the stoppage of two thirds of production.

The students' struggle must be the struggle of all Québécois, of all their organizations. It should be taken to the political level and become part of the struggle for the emancipation of the Quebec people.

We will be unable to establish free tuition and improve our social programs while we continue to pay 20 per cent of the tens of billions awarded by the federal government for the operation of the tar sands, the Ontario automobile industry and the purchase of the F-35 fighter planes.

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Notes:

1. For detailed results of the voting, see [Résultats des votes sur la dernière offre du gouvernement](#).

2. Coalition large de l'Association pour une solidarité syndicale étudiante [Broad coalition of the Association for student union solidarity]. Also participating in the strike were the Fédération étudiante universitaire du Québec; Fédération étudiante collégiale du Québec, and the Table de concertation étudiante du Québec.

3. Fédération nationale des enseignants et enseignantes du Québec, which is part of the Confederation of national trade unions (CSN).

4. See Michel David, "[Le nouvel ennemi public](#)," *Le Devoir*, May 12.

5. The 1949 strike in the asbestos industry fostered many of the social and political forces that initiated and led the Quiet Revolution a decade later, as did the Radio-Canada dispute in 1958. A major issue in the 20-month strike at United Aircraft (now Pratt & Whitney), in 1974-75, was the company refusal to allow deduction of union dues at source and later the use of scabs to break the strike. The violent strike ended without major gains for the workers, but was followed by a plant occupation. The PQ government elected soon afterwards allowed union dues deduction and introduced a still-popular anti-scab law.

[6.](#) The *lucides* (clear-eyed) was the name adopted by a group of right-wing political and corporate leaders who issued a neoliberal manifesto in 2005, which was answered by a manifesto signed by prominent “progressives,” the *solidaires*, among them some of the founders of Québec solidaire in 2006.

[7.](#) The QS proposals on post-secondary education are outlined in a leaflet that party members have been distributing during the student strike. Click [here](#) to see it.

[8.](#) FTQ – Quebec Federation of Labour; CSN – Confederation of National Trade Unions; CSQ – Central of Quebec Trade Unions.

[9.](#) It was also published, *inter alia*, in [L'aut'journal](#). See also Gilbert Lavoie, “Qu’est-ce qui n’a pas marché entre le gouvernement et les étudiants?” in [Le Soleil](#), May 12.

[10.](#) “Defiant Quebec students reject shabby government offer,” [note 2](#).

[11.](#) Fédération québécoise des professeures et professeurs d’université. Founded in 1991, the FQPPU includes 15 unions and associations that represent more than 5,000 university professors.

[12.](#) See Philippe Lapointe, “L’ironie de l’assurance-qualité,” first published in [Ultimatum](#) and [republished](#) in [L'aut'journal](#).

[13.](#) The CEGEPs – Collèges d’enseignement générale et professionnelle – are public post-secondary institutions with a general arts and science or occupational stream that is preparatory to university. Tuition is free in the CEGEPs, unlike the universities.

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