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A Pauline Marois supporter wears a red square denoting support for the student movement against tuition hikes with a party pin prior to a campaign rally in Montreal in August. (CHRISTINNE MUSCHI /REUTERS)

With Quebec's tuition hikes defeated, CLASSE presses on for free education

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One Quebec student group says that with tuition hikes officially off the table, it will now champion the idea of free education. The new Parti Québécois government scrapped a controversial increase in postsecondary tuition fees this week and a hardline student group is now turning to free education as its long-term goal.

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A woman with a fleur-de-lis and Quebec flag drawn on her face shouts as she marches through the streets with protesters banging pots and pans during a demonstration in support of striking Quebec students in Vancouver, B.C., on Wednesday May 30, 2012. Students in Quebec have been protesting proposed tuition hikes since February. THE CANADIAN PRESS

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CLASSE, which speaks for 100,000 Quebec students, says free education is entirely achievable and used a march attended by several hundred people on Saturday to highlight the issue.

“Our struggle for accessibility to higher education is not yet over,” said Jérémie Bédard-Wien, a spokesman for CLASSE.

Free education is not a position shared by the province’s two other major student associations and with the proposed hike by the former Liberal government formally cancelled, Quebec has the lowest tuition in the country again.

But CLASSE says it wants education to be completely accessible by being entirely free.

It’s an opinion that has limited political support.

The PQ government has said it favours indexing tuition to inflation but has promised to call a symposium on the issue.

The CLASSE will counter indexing tuition in favour of “education that is free – not only from tuition fees – but also from corporate influence,” Mr. Bédard-Wien said.

Students celebrated a victory on Saturday that had them in the streets for months. Premier Pauline Marois, on her first full day in office, kept an election promise by cutting the Liberal’s proposed tuition hike.

The province’s universities have long said they are chronically underfunded and facing shortfalls. By cutting the proposed hike, the province’s tuition stands at \$2,168 per year.

According to Statistics Canada, tuition has risen in every province except for Newfoundland and Labrador and now Quebec.

On average, Canadian students elsewhere will pay about \$5,500 this year. Students in Ontario pay the highest in tuition – more than \$7,100.

In a minority government situation, the likelihood of achieving free education in the current climate is highly unlikely, says one opposition Quebec politician who favours free education.

Françoise David of Québec Solidaire says her party is in favour of free education and will continue to promote it.

Ms. David says her party has demonstrated that it is economically feasible in terms of a five-year plan where funding slowly shifts to a zero-tuition model without cutting university funding.

However, the opposition Liberals and Coalition Avenir Québec most definitely are not on board, Ms. David said.

“It will be possible for a government that has the mandate,” Ms. David said. “It’s a question of time: We have to go step-by-step and convince the population that it’s possible.”

Some students say they like the idea of not having to pay tuition and it’s worth considering to ensure everyone has a chance to pursue education at a higher level.

“I think it’s a stark transition, I’m for it personally,” says Jason Ghikadis, 30, a University of Montreal student in the faculty of music, who attended Saturday’s protest.

“I think that realistically putting it in place ... will take a bit of time.”

Mr. Bédard-Wien, citing examples such as Germany and Scandinavian countries, say Quebec could follow those models.

He says he believes its possible in Quebec with better management of university funds and a commitment to allocate tax dollars and find financing from other sources.

“These are societies that have made progressive political choices for public services to be accessible,” Mr. Bédard-Wien said, noting that Quebec can do the same.

“That we have tuition here is a political choice that can be reversed.”

Saturday’s march was a mostly peaceful event, held under a steady rain. Police and protesters had brief skirmishes during isolated altercations.

Montreal police reported two arrests after projectiles were launched and an officer suffered a knee injury. Charges – if any – were not specified.

Ms. David also said Saturday that her party favours a public inquiry into police actions over the course of the entire student conflict – spanning several months and including near-daily protests.

While those marches have come to a halt, student movement organizers warn they are ready to go again in big numbers if need be.

“Given that the strike is no longer and many students are in intensive catch-up situations, we won’t see numbers like before,” Mr. Bédard-Wien said.

“But if the newly elected government decides to attack students, expect mobilization to pick up at the same levels as the spring.”

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