Montreal police carry out mass arrests to quell student strikes

A correspondent
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Montreal riot police on Thursday arrested 270 high school youth, some as young as 12 years old, in a bid to break a wave of student strikes that has touched dozens of schools in Montreal and other Quebec cities over the past two weeks.

To the consternation of the police, school administrators, and the provincial Parti Quebecois (PQ) government, the strikes have escalated in both size and militancy in recent days. Students have repeatedly disrupted traffic in downtown Montreal, on commuter highways and on the bridges that connect the Island of Montreal to the south shore of the St. Lawrence River.

The protests have been triggered by a public school teacher ban on extra-curricular activities, imposed by teacher unions to protest lagging contract talks. But many students blame the PQ government for the ban, as teachers have been without a contract since June 30, 1998. Moreover, many are using the strikes to voice complaints over poor school facilities, excessive discipline and society's general indifference to the concerns of youth.

For the second time in less than a week, Premier Lucien Bouchard on Thursday blamed teachers for the strikes. "I can only reiterate an urgent appeal to the union, to the teachers, to end their pressure tactics, which are evidently provoking these problems."

Bouchard has already threatened to suspend the teachers' right to strike should they join other Quebec public sector workers in a lengthy legal strike this November.

The teachers unions, for their part, have condemned the student protests. Monique Richard, president of the largest teachers' union, the Centrale de l'enseignement du Quebec (CEQ), says the high schools students are being incited by student "activists," implying that the protests are being sparked by politicized college students. "It's important to be in class and use your own mechanisms, like the student council ... But don't let yourself be fooled by activists," she said.

The CEQ, like most other Quebec unions, is a close ally of the PQ, and has supported the Bouchard government in making draconian cuts to social spending, including education, so as to eliminate the province's annual budget deficit by 2000.

While the student protests have affected schools across the greater Montreal region, the riot police chose to target students from Montreal's impoverished east end. When striking students entered the courtyard of a neighboring school, a detachment of more than 50 riot police, wearing helmets and carrying batons and shields, surrounded them.

The 270 students were detained in the school courtyard for an hour, then herded onto buses and transported to two police control centers. All were ultimately released. Those fourteen and older have been issued $100 tickets for refusing to leave an illegal assembly. The parents of those under 14 years have to speak to police authorities.

Dozens of parents arrived at the Chomedey de Maisoneuve high school while their children were being held captive by the riot police. Complained Carole Cadieux, "The police aren't telling us when we can go and get our kids. They said, 'Wait for a phone call.' I don't even know where my son is."

Despite the police action, strikes continued at several Montreal high schools Friday.

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