

Protests rock Quebec Youth Summit

Jacques Richard
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Last month's government-organized Quebec Youth Summit came very close to becoming a public relations disaster for the Parti Québécois (PQ) provincial government. Large numbers of youth, both in and outside the conference, denounced the government's right-wing agenda.

The youth summit opened February 22 in an atmosphere of palpable unease. To the PQ's chagrin, the press had revealed that earlier in the week Premier Lucien Bouchard had met with leading Quebec businessmen and, over a steak and wine dinner, finalized many of the youth summit's "decisions."

The first session was given over to speeches of welcome by various Quebec luminaries. As it wound up, an exasperated youth rose from his seat and declared: "Young people didn't come here to get lectured to."

That same evening, hundreds of youth joined a demonstration to protest against the "artificial" and "choreographed" character of the youth summit. The demonstration had been called by a coalition of community and student groups that was holding a "counter-summit" to address what it termed the real issues facing young people. These included the growth of "workfare," homelessness, the environment, the criminalization of youth and social exclusion.

The response of officialdom to this challenge was revealing. Without any prior warning or provocation, the Quebec City riot police started spraying the demonstrators with tear gas. In the ensuing confrontation, pool balls and two Molotov cocktails were thrown at the police. The following morning, Premier Bouchard condemned the demonstration as a "disgraceful event" and defended the police's actions. Meanwhile, a further protest against the summit was broken up by police and four youth were arrested.

Bouchard's claim that the protesters were responsible for the riot was challenged by many media reports. Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and CTV videotape show a vocal but pacific demonstration being transformed into a violent confrontation by the police's provocative actions.

If Bouchard was so angered, it is because the youth summit was more than just a run-of-the-mill public relations exercise. In the hopes of reviving support for Quebec independence, the PQ had mounted a months-long campaign at Quebec's universities and colleges to drum up support for the summit.

But a youth opinion survey made public a few days before the summit revealed that 77 percent of respondents didn't identify with any of the major political parties and had little interest in the summit.

Many young people were skeptical about the government's motives. The last such event—a 1996 socioeconomic summit which

brought together government officials, business groups and the province's union federations—had resulted in the endorsement of the PQ's "zero deficit" plan. This so-called "social consensus" then became the political springboard for massive social spending cuts and the elimination of tens of thousands of public sector jobs through early retirement. The budget and job cuts have decimated the province's schools, hospitals and other public services and provoked increasingly vocal opposition. Last summer Quebec's nurses struck for three weeks in defiance of anti-strike laws. Then in the fall, high school students mounted a wave of walkouts and road blockades to protest a lack of school resources, increasingly severe school discipline, and the canceling of extra-curricular activities as a result of stalled teacher contract negotiations.

After the events of the summit's opening day, Bouchard and his aides sought to retake control of the situation. While police were used to clear the streets of protesters, censorship was applied inside. ROCAJQ, a community group that had been invited to send observers to the summit, was prevented from circulating its analysis of the social and political significance of the summit. No doubt the PQ didn't like the fact that the ROCAJQ document said that the summit would probably not serve to improve living conditions for the youth, but would rather become "the occasion for renewing the austerity policies which were promoted during the summits of 1996."

According to media reports, the PQ's allies in the union bureaucracy played a pivotal role in preventing the summit's collapse. On the morning of the summit's second day, Gerald Larose, the recently retired president of the Confederation of National Trades Union, went from table to table urging delegates to give the process a chance.

The participation of all three labor federations in the Quebec Youth Summit—despite their claims that in the 1996 summits they were "tricked" into supporting the government's assault on social and public services—is fresh confirmation of their real role as political accomplices of the PQ and Quebec big business.

The union bureaucrats are also positioning themselves to take full financial advantage, through the activities of various union-controlled investment funds, of a new government-business "youth fund." After the government announced the creation of a three-year, \$240 million "youth fund" to be financed equally by the government and corporations, the Quebec Federation of Labor's Solidarity Fund proposed that the fund be made permanent so money invested in it could be capitalized.

The youth jobs fund was the major initiative to come out of the summit. While it is being touted as a job creation plan, it is in fact a government subsidy to corporate Quebec. Few details have

emerged from the summit itself, but the government's objectives were laid out in a document drafted in preparation for the summit titled *Youth Action Plan*. Among other things, it proposes a generous tax credit for portfolio management companies with internship programs. They will be allowed a tax deduction of 40 percent of internees' wages up to a maximum of \$25,000 per year, per internee. Another program, *Small Business Impact*, is to offer subsidies that will cover not just the wages of newly-hired university graduates, but will also fund "marketing activities and prospecting of foreign markets, as well as special projects." Press reports have indicated that, in exchange for sharing the cost of financing the "youth fund," business groups have received a government commitment of corporate tax cuts in the coming provincial budget.

At the summit, the government also announced that welfare payments will be indexed for inflation and that a \$100 per month penalty on welfare recipients who share accommodations will be abolished. These measures will cost the Quebec government an estimated \$110 million. But Bouchard ignored the most important demand of welfare rights advocates—the abolition of the mandatory "job insertion" (workfare) programs for "able-bodied" welfare recipients. This was no surprise, since workfare is central to the government's drive to reduce welfare rolls and expenditure and create a "flexible" labor market. By giving welfare recipients the choice of providing cheap labor in the name of community service, participating in poorly-funded, basic skills training programs or having their benefits cut, the government seeks to "encourage" them to accept low-wage jobs in the private sector.

The Guaranteed Income Bill (Bill 186), which establishes the framework for the "reinsertion" programs, specifically gives the government the power to exempt participating employers from having to adhere to labor laws such as the minimum wage and the right of association. A December 4, 1999 United Nations report criticized six Canadian provinces (including Quebec) for setting up "mandatory work programs for people on welfare and imposing sanctions ... on young people whenever they assert their right to choose the kind of work they want to do."

Although Bill 186 imposes a moratorium (until September 2000) on new mandatory job reinsertion programs for youth aged 18 to 25, the existing ones remain in effect. Under the *Options* program, which is aimed at youth 18 to 24 years of age, thousands have had their welfare payments cut by \$150 to \$300 a month for ignoring directives to accept workfare or poorly paid private sector jobs.

The summit was also the occasion for the government to announce \$1 billion in new funding for education over the next three years. This represents an annual increase of only 3.5 percent, at least half of which will likely be eaten up by inflation.

Quebec's universities will receive an additional \$200 to \$300 million a year, although they have indicated that without an increase of at least \$600 million, they will be forced to carry out a new program of sweeping cuts. Since the PQ came to power in 1994, government funding for higher education has been slashed by over 15 percent, hundreds of full-time faculty positions have been eliminated and university tuition fees have been raised by 250 percent.

In the public-school system, where the high school dropout rate

is around 35 percent, the government has cut into front-line services, equipment and personnel.

The government "plan" for the education system is to align it ever more closely to the needs and social values of the corporate world. The notion of educating youth as cultured citizens who will take an active part in the collective development of society has been repudiated. "I come from private enterprise," announced Education Minister François Legault in a speech prior to the summit. "And in private enterprise, if you are not efficient, you disappear.... I am here to [build] a new form of collaboration between private enterprise and the entire education sector ... to insure the competitive character of our companies."

While the Quebec Youth Summit may have brightened prospects for a few aspiring politicians and high-tech entrepreneurs, its underlying perspective and the measures it adopted will only make life harder for the majority of youth. In a world dominated by fierce market competition for increased profits at the expense of social needs, young people are often the first victims. Consider the following figures:

- * Young Quebecers aged 15 to 29 represent 37 percent of the province's unemployed. In 1998, 32 percent of them, as opposed to 17 percent of the workforce as a whole, were working part-time.

- * Throughout Canada, young people have been particularly hard hit by the "reform" of Unemployment Insurance. In 1990, 75 percent of young unemployed people received unemployment benefits; in 1997 only 25 percent did.

- * In 1996, three out of every four young Canadians living alone, and close to one out of every two households headed by a person 25 years old or younger, had an income below the poverty line. In Quebec, 52 percent of workers earning the minimum wage are young people.

- * Since 1992 the most important cause of death among Quebec's youth has been suicide.



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