

Rubber bullets, tear gas and mass arrests at the Summit of the Americas in Quebec City

François Legras
2 May 2001

Last month's Summit of the Americas, which brought together the heads of government of the Western Hemisphere, was the object of extraordinary security measures, including the largest police mobilization in Canadian history.

During the three days of the summit (April 20-22), Quebec City's downtown core looked like a war zone, with thousands of heavily-armed police occupying the streets and repeatedly attacking peaceful demonstrators with a panoply of weapons.

For the first time, riot police in Canada used water cannon and rubber bullets to "push back" protesters. Police also fired more than 5,000 tear gas canisters, rendering the air in the city-centre noxious for hours at a stretch.

According to the government, more than 6,000 police, over 1,000 Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) personnel, and hundreds of customs officials took part in the security operation. And thousands of additional CAF personnel at two nearby bases, one in Quebec City and the other at nearby Valcartier, were poised to intervene if the government decided to declare Quebec a militarized zone, so as to put a quick end to anti-summit unrest.

Only persons with a security pass were allowed to enter a 10-square-kilometre section of the city that was given over to hosting the summit and its delegates. To enforce the no-go zone, police had it encircled by a 3 metre-high, 3.8 kilometre-long chain-link fence.

Just days before the summit began, a Quebec Superior Court judge ruled that the police security perimeter "to a large extent" violated the rights guaranteed in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. But in the next breath, he invoked the loophole that the state gave itself when the Charter was adopted in 1982, and said that the fence and the exclusion of most Quebec residents from the downtown of their own city were "reasonable" given the context of the summit and did not violate what is

permissible in "a free and democratic society."

Prior to the summit, the 600 detainees of Orsainville Prison, the area's largest jail, were transferred elsewhere, so as to make room for the anti-summit protesters that the police expected to arrest. (The police also had plans to use school gymnasiums as mass detection centres if the prison had become filled to capacity.)

Many groups, including the New Democratic Party, are now demanding a public inquiry into the role of the police at the summit, alleging that the police attacked peaceful protesters, made numerous unjustified arrests, and placed lives at risk by firing both tear gas and rubber bullets in ways known to be especially dangerous. Even the *Globe and Mail*, the traditional mouthpiece of the Bay Street financial houses, has conceded that the police operation went too far.

But the vast majority of the corporate media and Canada's political leaders have lauded the police. Declared Parti Québécois Security Minister, Serge Ménard, "I sincerely believe that Quebec has established new standards for police conduct in similar protests all over the world."

Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien repeatedly praised the police, but also praised the Quebec Federation of Labor for ensuring that the vast majority of anti-summit protesters never came even within sight of the police security-perimeter.

Prior to the summit, government spokesmen defended the security operation, saying protesters would have the right to demonstrate near the security fence. But after a small group of protesters succeeded in making a tiny breach in the fence on the first day, the police used the easy pretext that "radicals" wanted to storm the summit to systematically drive peaceful protesters away, using tears gas, water cannon, rubber and plastic bullets and attack dogs.

Ménard has termed these actions "defensive," but his

assessment has been challenged by a large number of demonstrators and observers, including the Quebec League of Rights and Liberties. The League, which had 40 observers on the scene, charges that police provoked protesters by firing tear gas at them with no warning and even as they stood outside the security fence demonstrating peacefully. In some cases, says the League, tear gas “was fired directly at groups sitting down and making peace signs.” The League also has raised concerns that the police fired tear gas canisters directly at people, an action that elsewhere has led to serious injuries and even fatalities.

The League's criticisms are doubly significant in that prior to the summit it made a very public display of its neutrality, saying it would condemn abuses by police and demonstrators with equal vehemence.

In suppressing the Quebec City protests, Canadian police for the first time used the impact weapon Arwen 37 which fires rubber bullets. In Palestine and Ireland this weapon has been implicated in many deaths. While the police have claimed their use of rubber bullets was very limited, the League reports that “hundreds” of rubber bullets were fired from late Saturday afternoon on. “The use of plastic bullets was unnecessary and dangerous since they [the police] were able to control the situation with gas. Unnecessarily provocative as well was the intervention of the dog squad.”

Le Soleil has reported that bystander Eric Lafrenière was hit in the throat by a rubber bullet while watching a protest near the security perimeter. Lafrenière's larynx has been so seriously injured he may never be able to talk again. Another passerby, Richard Savignac, told *La Presse* that he was hit by a rubber bullet while taking a stroll with friends. NDP MP Svend Robinson was hit in the foot by a bullet while standing amid a crowd of 200 people peacefully demonstrating outside the security fence. In the same volley in which Robinson was hit, one protester's jaw was fractured and another's hand was broken.

The *Globe and Mail* has reported that it has obtained a police document that reveals summit security forces were authorized to use lethal force to bring down a “subject ... commit[ting] an aggressive act with an object such as a stick, a firearm, a chemical substance (Molotov cocktails or acid) or act[ing] in a manner causing serious injury to a police officer or another person.”

Moreover, this document identified five levels of escalating police action. The use of gas and rubber bullets was the fourth highest, meaning police stopped just short

of using lethal force against the Quebec City protests.

Arrests were numerous and in many cases arbitrary, most of them taking place outside the security fence. Jaggi Singh, an activist well known by the police as a leader of the “Anti-Capitalist Convergence,” was arrested on the summit's first day while he stood with other protesters far from the security fence. Plainclothes police jumped on Singh and threw him inside a van while hitting him with their batons.

According to figures published by *La Presse*, police made 463 arrests. In one case, young people staffing a mobile kitchen that was helping to feed protesters were arrested more than one kilometer away from the so-called “wall of shame.” Many of those arrested had to spend some eight hours in a van, their hands tied behind their backs, before being brought to Orsainville jail.

Conditions at Orsainville were degrading. Upon arriving, the detainees were ordered to strip, then led naked to the prison's inner courtyard where they were “disinfected” in full view of prison personnel and each other. Once inside, they were often packed four or five in a cell with a single mattress and under the most rudimentary hygienic conditions.

The detainees' right to a lawyer was systematically violated. Many were kept in jail more than 24 hours, the maximum legal amount of time before a jailed person must be brought before a judge. When people did appear to be charged, the prosecution systematically asked for three days of additional detention (the maximum allowed under Quebec's criminal code) saying they were not yet ready to present any evidence. And during the first court appearances, access was barred to the public—a serious violation of the right of all accused to have their cases heard in public.

The brutality with which the government, police and courts sought to silence the protests at the Quebec summit is a serious warning to the working class. The struggle against the advocates of “direct action” was invoked as a means to test new techniques of repression and to create important precedents for the suppression of fundamental democratic rights.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact