

Canadian students join antiwar protests

Our correspondents
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Despite severe snow storms and frigid temperatures, students in many cities across Canada joined the international day of anti-war action. Hundreds of copies of the WSWs open letter to students were distributed in Montreal and Toronto, winning an appreciative response from those looking for a way forward in the struggle against war.

In Montreal, about 3,000 students, including contingents from Cegeps (junior colleges), joined a march to a Canadian Armed Forces recruiting office to condemn the impending war and any Canadian involvement. They then proceeded to the US consulate, where they were confronted by police in full riot gear.

At least two Cegeps, Vieux-Montreal and St-Laurent, were closed down by student strikes, while Hochelaga-Maisonneuve and Valleyfield voted to send delegations. For the first time in nine years, McGill University students voted in favor of a strike. Hand-painted placards and banners demanded that funding be poured into education and social programs, instead of war.

The featured speaker, Amir Khadir, of the Union des forces progressistes (Progressive Forces Union, UFP), called on Prime Minister Jean Chretien to “listen to public opinion” and oppose the war.

But students who spoke to the WSWs expressed skepticism in calls for pressure to be applied to the Chretien government or the United Nations. A number of students were familiar with the WSWs and were prepared to seriously consider the political line outlined in the open letter of turning toward the international working class with a socialist program.

In Toronto, some 400 students from various universities, including Toronto, York and Ryerson, as well as high school and community college students, rallied at 4pm in Dundas Square. Slogans included: “Drop sanctions, not bombs,” “Books, not bombs,” “Oil\$ + AOL + CNN = Bad News” and “The First

Casualty of War is Truth—Had Any Lately?”

Police in bullet-proof vests were mobilized to prevent the students marching down Yonge Street and through the downtown center, where the demonstrators intended to appeal for support from commuters. After a brief confrontation, the students marched along the sidewalk toward the US consulate.

During the morning, up to 300 students marched around the University of Toronto campus, chanting anti-war slogans.

Earlier, in a provocative attack on democratic rights, students at York University were detained by police at the instigation of the university administration. About 200 students had been picketing at the Main and Sentinel Gates from 7am, agitating for a student strike. They were passing out leaflets and explaining their cause, resulting in some traffic delays, when police moved in, singling out known activists.

At Sentinel Gate, campus security guards warned students to abandon the picket line. Then police arrived to arrest three students, apparently on charges of trespassing and breaching the peace. In a flagrant attack on political rights, at least some of the students were detained until after the downtown rally.

A student who witnessed the arrests told the WSWs that two of the arrested students had been the primary organisers of anti-war activity at York University. Police ordered both to move on immediately, giving them no time to discuss the order with fellow students. The activists were then quickly taken to police cars and driven off, together with another arrested student.

At the Main Gate, about eight police cars arrived, containing 12-15 officers, in the midst of a discussion with a young driver. A student told the WSWs that the driver claimed his car had been damaged, whereupon police detained one of the picketers and ordered others to dismantle the picket line.

Students marched to the University president’s office

to protest the calling in of police and demand the dropping of charges. When officials refused to meet them, they occupied a hallway before marching through the university chanting anti-war slogans. One female student was arrested and charged with assault for simply demanding that a right-wing student stop taking her photograph.

The York administration refused to give students immunity from academic penalties for not attending classes, even though individual faculty members made alternative arrangements for classes and assured their students that they would not be penalized.

Facing an extremely heavy snow storm, many students appeared to show their solidarity by staying off campus for the day. Where classes did proceed, attendance was much reduced.

None of the protesting students who spoke to the WSWS believed that the impending attack on Iraq had anything to do with establishing democracy or destroying weapons of mass destruction. One student commented: "Behind the rhetoric about democracy and weapons, the message from Washington is that they want every government in the world to toe their line.

"Bush's drive to war is not just about oil, but also wider economic interests. The latest article I read showed that the US government is worried that oil-producing countries will switch from the US dollar to the Euro. The US is in such deep international debt that this could lead to a serious economic collapse."

He agreed that protest alone would not stop the war. "We need something like a general strike to shut the economy down. We have to go from weekend and student protests to weekday shutdowns."



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