

Montreal: Establishment calls for increased police powers after mini-riot

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Acts of petty vandalism committed in Montreal on April 21 after the victory of the local hockey club in the first round of the National Hockey League (NHL) playoffs have become the ostensible reason behind a concerted appeal by the ruling elite for greater police powers.

After the night's game between the Montreal Canadiens and the Boston Bruins, several thousand fans took to the streets in the downtown area to celebrate their team's victory. Approximately an hour after the match, when the number of fans in the streets had diminished considerably, a small group of people began to cause trouble. The City of Montreal Police Department (SPVM), which had deployed 300 police officers in the downtown area for what was only a first-round playoff game, brought in the riot squad. Confrontations ensued and the police arrested 16 people. Five police cars were burned and twelve others damaged. The windows of a dozen downtown stores were broken, and several of the stores were looted. No serious injuries were reported.

The mass media have since criticised the police for being too timid and "friendly" in their approach. Yves Boisvert, in the Montreal daily *La Presse*, wrote that "... if the goal of the operation is to stop things from boiling over, there must be a show of force [and] active retaliatory steps." Jean-Robert Sansfaçon, the editor-in-chief of *Le Devoir*, declared that it was most important to "... know how to protect the businesses, and above all how to disperse crowds rapidly, instead of letting people come together in the expectation of doing something, regardless of the nature of that thing."

The reactions of politicians were equally revealing. Mario Dumont, the leader of Action Démocratique du Québec (ADQ), stated that police officers will need to lower their visors and brandish their batons, and that from now on they should have the green light from politicians to react forcefully to future disturbances. "It is necessary that the police have all the powers that they want,"

declared Dumont.

In the last provincial election in 2007, the ADQ profited considerably from the popular alienation felt towards the two traditional governing parties of Québec—the federalist Liberal Party and the *indépendantiste* Parti Québécois (PQ)—increasing its representation in Québec's parliament almost ten-fold to become the Official Opposition. The many years of budget cutbacks imposed by Liberal and PQ governments, along with the sabotage by the trade union bureaucracy of the powerful workers' movement against those attacks, created the conditions for the growth of the right-wing populist ADQ. Exploiting the popular frustration caused by the deep social crisis, Dumont's party stoked chauvinistic and xenophobic sentiment by denouncing the supposedly excessive accommodations to religious minorities, particularly Muslims. The political establishment eagerly took up his reactionary campaign.

On the government side, Raymond Bachand, the Liberal minister responsible for the Montreal region, affirmed this and said of the incidents of April 21, "...we must be better prepared next time."

This recommendation has been more than followed. The SPVM established a special hotline inciting people to denounce individuals who participated in the April 21 riot. Aided by the servility of the media, which has cultivated a climate of repression and denunciation, the SPVM on April 23 raided several newspapers and television stations in search of pictures and video footage that could lead to more arrests.

The legality of the raids conducted at Radio-Canada, *La Presse*, *The Gazette*, CTV, Global, *Le journal de Montreal* and TVA-LCN will most likely be contested in the Superior Court since hearings scheduled for April 24 were postponed. The Federation of Professional Journalists also condemned these raids as a blow to the independence, security, and credibility of journalists,

since they would have the effect of transforming journalists into simple auxiliaries of the police.

On the night of April 24, the Canadians played the Philadelphia Flyers in Montreal, the first game in the second round of the NHL playoffs. By then the SPVM had dramatically changed its strategy, mobilizing a massive police presence during and after the game. The SPVM also called in help from the Sûreté du Québec (SQ, the provincial police) and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). The RCMP launched a helicopter to patrol the downtown during the night of the game. Wrote *La Presse*, “The police even thought to issue a NOTAM—a warning to airplane pilots—to restrict air traffic over the downtown. This rare measure, last used during the visit of American president George Bush to Montebello, was rejected.”

(The reference to Montebello, a small town in Québec that hosted a summit of the US, Canadian, and Mexican heads of government in August 2007, is inadvertently revealing. During the protests outside the summit, agents of the SQ disguised as anarchists sought to incite protesters to attack riot police. This act of provocation was captured on amateur video and disseminated via YouTube. See *Canada: Police agent-provocateurs unmasked at Montebello summit protests*)

During and after the game, approximately 700 police officers were on the scene. When fans took to the streets, no celebration, other than shouts of joy, was permitted. Pedestrians could not circulate on the streets, a form of celebration that is normally permitted. A dozen police officers immediately accosted a group of 25 young people watching the game on the sidewalk as the Canadians scored the winning goal.

The media and politicians have presented the incidents of April 21 as incomprehensible. To the extent they attempt to explain them at all, they limit themselves to platitudes about “the Facebook generation”. What they ignore is that the spontaneous outbursts that erupted that Monday, even though perpetrated by a small group of fans, are fundamentally an expression of the immense social alienation and anger that is percolating within the population, especially the youth.

Since the beginning of the 1980s, successive Québec governments have made massive cuts to social spending and public services. The shift to the right of the ruling elite in Québec—whether with the “zero deficit” policies under the PQ government of Lucien Bouchard at the end of the 1990s or the “re-engineering” of the state under the current Liberal government of Jean Charest—has done

nothing but exacerbate economic insecurity and social inequality. At the federal level, the Chrétien/Martin Liberal government, along with the Harper Conservative government that followed it, have implemented the same type of right-wing measures. Harper, notably, has championed the Canadian Armed Forces, giving them a leading role in the neo-colonial occupation of Afghanistan. (The Chretien government launched Canada’s military intervention in Afghanistan). In such conditions, the prospects for youth have deteriorated, with many now living in precarious financial circumstances.

In 2005, \$103 million in cuts to the system of student grants and loans proposed by the provincial Liberal government pushed post-secondary students in Québec to strike for several weeks. In the fall 2007 and winter 2008, thousands of students at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM) struck against the tuition increases proposed by the administration after the Charest government continually cut funding to the province’s universities. Concerned with the strike, which was largely ignored by the media, the administration of UQAM appealed to the SPVM to suppress the students, obtaining an injunction (in place until June 19) threatening any student who “aggressively” pickets the university with a fine of \$50,000 and the possibility of a year in jail.

The increased police powers demanded by the media and political establishment are not intended to suppress “small groups of organised criminals”. The goal is to accustom the population to more and more cops in the streets. In a society in which class tensions continue to mount, the repressive apparatus of the state is, and will increasingly be, aimed at the youth and the working class as a whole.



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