

# Quebec authorities seeking to criminalize student strike

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Quebec's Liberal government is using repression—arrests, court injunctions and the threat of cancelling the winter semester—to force an end to a nearly two-month-long strike of university and CEGEP (pre-university and technical college) students. Nevertheless, almost 200,000 students are continuing to boycott classes to oppose the Charest Liberal government's plan to raise university tuition fees by 75 percent over the next five years, beginning in September.

Early last Wednesday, riot police chased and arrested more than 60 students who continued to demonstrate in downtown Montreal after the police had declared their demonstration illegal. The reason given by the police for dispersing, and later arresting, the student protestors was that they had perpetrated acts of "vandalism", such as toppling tables and displays while moving through the chic Queen Elizabeth Hotel and the Eaton Shopping Centre.

Despite police statements to the contrary, there is no evidence to prove that the students committed any criminal acts. The arrests were filmed by CUTV, the Concordia University students' community television station. The video, broadcast on the Internet, shows police shoving students prior to their arrest and ignoring students who questioned why they were being manhandled and arrested.

Montreal's riot police have repeatedly used batons, tear gas, pepper spray and sound grenades to attack protesting students.

CUTV cameraman Laith Marouf was arrested for filming Wednesday's arrests. CUTV reporter Sabine Friesinger, who was with Marouf, recounted what happened later the same day: "We were broadcasting live. Students were surrounded and pushed by police. They were also hit. The cameraman said several times: 'I am media, we are on live.' They definitively did not want us filming that. I have finally been able to retrieve the camera, but he (the cameraman), is still under arrest."

While the police are illegalizing demonstrations so as to allow them to make arbitrary arrests, the courts are moving to illegalize student protests and even laying the framework for the outlawing of the strike itself.

On March 30, a Quebec Superior Court heard a motion filed by a student from the Collège d'Alma who claimed his right to attend his courses had been violated because the strike vote initially conducted by the local student association had reputedly been

marred by irregularities. Although the disputed strike vote had been re-held a week later with a clear majority voting in favor of the strike, Judge Jean Lemelin upheld the student's claim that his rights were being violated and ordered the resumption of classes as part of an injunction banning any strike at Collège d'Alma until at least April 10.

In his ruling, Lemelin called into question students' "right" to boycott their classes. "The legality of the strike", he wrote, "appears dubious considering Quebec's labour law regime, which only gives the right to strike to certain people and under very strict conditions".

A few days later, on April 3, Superior Court Judge Bernard Godbout ordered students to lift picket lines blocking access to an anthropology course at Quebec City's Laval University, following a petition filed by a student enrolled in the course. The student's lawyer was later interviewed by the media and stated that he had received some 150 e-mails from students seeking to initiate similar court orders.

The next day, the administration of the Université de Québec à Montréal (UQAM) filed its own motion in Superior Court seeking an injunction outlawing picketing by its 23,000 striking students. Representatives of the striking students offered to voluntarily cease "militant" picketing, but the UQAM administration insisted on proceeding with its injunction request. Justice Micheline Perrault promptly issued a court order designed to intimidate the striking students and facilitate the administration's plans to break the strike.

The injunction, which is in effect until April 19, orders picketing students to refrain from interfering with access or traffic near UQAM pavilions and to be careful not to "intimidate" or "threaten" any person wishing to enter them. Those found guilty of contravening the injunction are liable to a fine of up to \$50,000 and imprisonment for up to one year.

Education Minister Line Beauchamp has meanwhile threatened that if the strike continues much longer, many affected CEGEPs and university departments will be forced to cancel the semester.

With all but unanimous support from the corporate media, Beauchamp, Premier Jean Charest and Finance Minister Raymond Bachand have steadfastly rejected any modifications, let alone the rescinding, of the government's plan to raise university tuition fees by \$325 per year.

In an attempt to confuse the public about the issues at stake,

Finance Minister Bachand did announce last Thursday that the government is ready to extend its loan program to “middle class students” and consider setting up a new repayment scheme that takes into account post-graduation income.

But neither of these measures addresses the striking students’ main demand—guaranteeing access to quality postsecondary education for all. Their only impact would be to further increase student debt.

Despite the government’s hard line, and despite police and court intimidation, there is strong sentiment to continue the strike, which is now the longest in the province’s history. There is a general feeling among young people that their future is at stake and outrage over the government’s indifference to their concerns.

Some 180,000 students are on unlimited strike across the province, some for more than 50 days. Underscoring their belief that education should be a social right, students from at least one CEGEP—CEGEP du Vieux Montréal—have voted not to return to classes until the government abolishes all university tuition fees.

However, to advance their struggle in the face of the determined opposition not only of the Liberal government, but the entire big business elite, students require a new political perspective, based on opposition to the ruling class drive to make the working class pay for the crisis of global capitalism through job and pay cuts and the dismantling of public services.

The Liberals’ tuition fee hikes are part of a wide-ranging austerity program, involving social spending cuts, privatizations and new and increased user fees and regressive taxes.

Moreover, similar austerity measures are being implemented by all levels of government and by parties of every political stripe across Canada.

If the government and elite have been so intransigent in face of the groundswell of support for the strike and have increasingly resorted to state repression, it is because they recognize that the students’ opposition to the tuition fee hike and their insistence that education is a social right constitutes an implicit challenge to their entire class strategy.

This implicit challenge must now be made explicit. Students must not struggle alone, but should instead turn to the working class and fight for a working class-led counteroffensive against the entire program of social reaction being advanced by the ruling elite. A turn to the working class requires above all a struggle to break the political influence of the trade union bureaucracy, which for decades has smothered worker resistance, quarantined the struggles of Quebec workers from those of workers in the rest of Canada and internationally, and sought to tie the working class to the big business Parti Québécois.

This socialist perspective is rejected by the student unions leading the strike, including the one that initiated the strike movement, CLASSE (“The Broader Coalition of the Association for Student-Union Solidarity”). The leaders of CLASSE seek to limit the student strike to a single-issue protest aimed at convincing the Charest government to negotiate. They never

mention workers as a potent social force that students should mobilize.

To the extent that they speak of broadening the students’ struggle at all, it is to appeal to and join with various and sundry middle-class protest groups and the trade unions. The official guest list for a “large popular rally” being organized by CLASSE for today consists of representatives of several unions, including the United Steelworkers Union, the Centrale des syndicats du Québec (CSQ), the Confederation of National Trade unions (CNTU) and the National Federation of Teachers of Quebec (FNEQ).

The latter has already offered its services to the government to help derail the student strike. According to an article published on Radio Canada’s web site: “The FNEQ believes that a moratorium of one year on tuition increases and the holding of a real public debate on education would be welcomed by students and could put an end to their pressure tactics.”

The other danger which threatens the student strike is its diversion behind the Parti Québécois (PQ). Its leader, Pauline Marois, recently promised that her party would cancel the increase in tuition fees if she took power. This is a fraud. The *indépendantiste* PQ is as devoted to upholding the interests of big business as is the federalist PLQ (Quebec Liberal Party). The PQ governments of Lucien Bouchard and Bernard Landry that held power between 1995 and 2003 carried out the greatest social spending cuts in Quebec history, including eliminating tens of thousands of jobs in the health care and education sectors. Moreover, the PQ has repeatedly denounced the Charest government for not cutting the provincial budget deficit more quickly.

Silent on the PQ’s history of drastically cutting social programs, the leaders of the FECQ (Federation of Quebec College Students) and the FEUQ (Federation of Quebec University Students) have announced that the “next phase of the student struggle” will be to target ten Liberal Members of the National Assembly considered most vulnerable in the next provincial election.



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