

Police state bill passed to suppress Quebec student strike

Keith Jones
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Quebec's National Assembly adopted emergency legislation last Friday that imposes draconian restrictions on the right to demonstrate and criminalizes the fourteen-week, provincewide student strike against plans to raise university tuition fees by more than 80 percent.

Passed in less than 24 hours, the Quebec Liberal government's Bill 78 includes a series of police state measures:

Striking students and their supporters are banned from picketing within 50 meters of university and CEGEP (pre-university and technical college) buildings.

Teachers are dragooned into the government's strikebreaking drive. Bill 78 legally compels them to perform their work duties in full, in defiance of a democratically decided boycott of their classes, and to make no accommodations to striking students.

Student associations and unions representing teachers and other university and CEGEP employees "must employ appropriate means to induce" their members to abide by the law, i.e., act as auxiliaries of the state in suppressing the student strike.

Demonstrations of fifty people or more—no matter the cause—are illegal, unless protest organizers submit to police in advance the proposed route and duration of the demonstration and abide by all changes requested by police. Organizers are legally obliged to enforce the police-prescribed route.

Persons convicted of violating any of these provisions are subject to massive fines.

Canada's ruling elite has enthusiastically welcomed Bill 78, dismissing concerns over the legislation's assault on the rights to free speech and assembly. Quebec's most influential daily, *La Presse*, backed the

legislation as a necessary weapon to kill "the snake of violence and disorder." Alongside an editorial endorsing Bill 78, the *Globe and Mail*, Canada's newspaper of record, carried a comment titled "Tuition Protesters are the Greeks of Canada."

The legislation is the culmination of a campaign of state violence against the student strike. Police have provoked violence, then used tear gas, baton charges, sound grenades and rubber bullets to disperse students and their supporters.

Speaking in the National Assembly debate on Bill 78, Natural Resources Minister Clément Gignac compared the student strike to an "insurrection." Earlier in the week, Finance Minister Raymond Bachand blamed "Marxists" who "use intimidation tactics" for the mass pickets that have frustrated government efforts to break the strike.

Behind the ruling class's frenzied response to the strike is their recognition that it represents an implicit challenge to the austerity measures being implemented by governments at every level and of every political stripe in the spectrum of official Canadian politics.

Their greatest fear is that the student strike could become the catalyst for a mass movement of the working class against their drive to place the full burden of the capitalist crisis on working people.

The events in Quebec exemplify a global process. Capitalist governments the world over are responding with state repression to mounting resistance to their class-war program of wage and jobs cuts and the dismantling of social services. They are trampling on democratic rights and criminalizing working-class opposition.

Over the past year, Canada's federal Conservative government has repeatedly use emergency laws to break or prevent strikes, including by Air Canada and

Canada Post workers, and to strip workers of their collective bargaining rights.

In response to riots that erupted last August following a police murder, the British government ordered police to invade inner-city neighbourhoods across the country and told the courts to set aside normal due process in order to impose exemplary punishments.

The Spanish government mobilized the military to break an air traffic controllers strike and the French government mounted a massive nationwide police operation against striking oil refinery workers.

When the Greek and Italian governments proved unable to impose the staggering cuts demanded by international financial markets because of popular opposition, they were replaced with unelected “technocratic” governments and the austerity measures were imposed in full.

Taking place in the wake of elections in France and Greece in which voters repudiated austerity governments, this weekend’s NATO summit in Chicago has been the occasion for yet another massive state security operation. The aim is to intimidate opponents of big business and social reaction and acclimatize the population to the gutting of civil liberties.

As in the 1930s, the bourgeoisie’s response to the global breakdown of capitalism is to turn toward dictatorial methods of rule, even as it invokes democracy and human rights to justify imperialist wars in Afghanistan, Libya, Syria and other countries.

Two vital conclusions must be drawn: the working class faces a struggle for political power against the capitalist social order and the defence of democratic rights requires the revolutionary mobilization of the working class.

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