Mass repression in Quebec: A warning to the working class

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More than 1,200 people have been arrested in Quebec since the provincial Liberal government adopted emergency legislation May 19 that criminalizes the more than three-month-old student strike and places sweeping restrictions on the right to demonstrate.

The mass arrests are testimony both to the depth of popular opposition to Bill 78 and to the determination of Canada's ruling class to stamp out the student strike and run roughshod over all opposition to its class-war agenda of wage and job cuts and the dismantling of public services.

Last Tuesday, the 100th day of the student strike, more than 150,000 people marched through the streets of Montreal in one of the largest demonstrations in Quebec history. Protests against Bill 78 and in defiance of its draconian provisions are now taking place nightly in many working-class neighbourhoods of Montreal, as well as in other cities across Quebec.

In response, the government has intensified its campaign of repression. Within hours of last Tuesday's demonstration, Montreal police invoked Bill 78 to justify the violent dispersal of "illegal" demonstrators. The next evening, riot police in Montreal kettled—surrounded and aggressively pinned—a peaceful protest, arresting more than 500 people. Quebec City Police staged their own mass arrests that same evening, charging 170 people for the "crime" of demonstrating.

Canada's ruling class fully supports the state suppression of the student strike, just as they have supported the Liberal government's steadfast refusal to discuss any changes to its plan to hike university tuition fees by 82 percent over the next seven years. The *Globe and Mail*, the traditional mouthpiece of Canada's big banks, has taken the Liberal government in Quebec to task for not using Bill 78 to carry out an even more sweeping campaign of arrests and police violence. It complained in an editorial published last Thursday—after the mass arrests in Montreal and Quebec City—that protesters have yet to "feel the law's bite" and that striking students "haven't lost anything yet."

The Quebec government's use of the iron fist of repression and its brazen attack on civil liberties is an expression of a global process. Facing ever-widening popular resistance to their drive to place the burden of the capitalist crisis on the working class, governments are criminalizing dissent and trampling on the most basic democratic rights, just as they did in the 1930s.

Over the course of the past year, Canada's national Conservative Party government has repeatedly used emergency laws to break strikes and impose concessions demands on workers. It has vowed to introduce similar legislation as early as today to outlaw the current strike by Canadian Pacific railway workers.

In Greece and Italy, the international financial elite organized the dismissal of elected governments after they proved unable to impose the banks' austerity diktats in full. They then imposed unelected "technocratic" governments that rammed the measures through in the face of mass opposition. Now the same forces are trying to terrorize the people of Greece, threatening them with expulsion from the euro zone and economic ruin unless they vote for parties pledged to implement their demands for even more brutal cuts in working-class living standards and the destruction of public services.

The hypocrisy of the bourgeoisie knows no bounds. The ruling classes of Canada, the US and Europe wage imperialist wars in the name of democracy and human rights even as they adopt police-state measures to crush working-class opposition at home and lurch toward dictatorial forms of rule.

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Workers and young people must draw the requisite conclusions.

The capitalist elite is intent on imposing a social counterrevolution, eliminating what remains of the social benefits the working class wrenched from it through the great social struggles of the last century.

Any struggle over a fundamental democratic or social need of working people, including the right to a decent education, inevitably leads to a headlong collision with the political representatives of big business and the capitalist state.

Democratic and social rights can be secured only through the independent political mobilization of the working class against the state and the entire moribund capitalist social order and the fight for workers' governments and socialism.

These conclusions must become the basis for the expansion of the Quebec student strike and the struggle against Bill 78 on a fundamentally different basis.

The political perspective advanced by the student associations—the claim that students can secure the repeal of the tuition fee hikes through a single-issue protest campaign based on pressuring the big business politicians—has proven to be false.

The only way forward is to broaden the struggle and make the strike the catalyst for the mobilization of the working class in Quebec, across Canada and internationally against corporate job- and wage-cutting and the austerity measures being pursued by governments of every stripe in the official political spectrum. In opposition to the bourgeoisie, the working class must advance it own socialist program to resolve the economic crisis, based on the reorganization of economic life to make fulfilling social needs, not enriching the few, the animating principle.

A turn on the part of students to the working class means assisting the workers in rebelling against the trade unions, which for decades have suppressed the class struggle and imposed concessions and social spending cuts. The Quebec unions systematically isolated the student strike. Then, at the beginning of this month, they worked with the Quebec Liberal Party government to impose a sellout agreement that called for the government's tuition hikes to be implemented in full.

Canada's social democratic party, the New Democratic Party (NDP), has declared itself "neutral" on the Quebec student strike, while in Ontario, with the full support of the unions, it is facilitating the passage of a minority Liberal government budget that cuts spending by more than $15 billion over the next three years and slashes the wages of one million public-sector workers.

In the course of the strike, CLASSE (The Broader Coalition of the Association for Student-Union Solidarity) has gained support by professing to be a militant alternative to the two other province-wide student associations, which have long been patronized by the unions and like them are politically aligned with the big business Parti Quebecois.

But CLASSE advances the same protest perspective—i.e., appealing to the ruling class for reform—and is playing a vital role in preventing the development of a broader struggle of the working class to bring down the governments in both Quebec and Ottawa.

Even after the imposition of Bill 78, CLASSE continues to seek a negotiated settlement with the Quebec Liberal government. It promotes the fiction that the unions represent the workers and opposes making the student strike a means for mobilizing the entire working class against the austerity program of the Quebec Liberal and federal Conservative governments. Its orientation to the establishment and acceptance of the existing political structure are underlined by its policy of limiting the struggle to the parameters of Quebec, thereby helping to quarantine the Quebec movement and enforce the ethno-linguistic divide that the Canadian bourgeoisie has always manipulated as a key stratagem for maintaining its rule.

In opposition to these forces, class-conscious students and workers must take up the struggle for the independent mobilization of the working class in the fight for workers' power. Above all, this requires the building of an alternative revolutionary leadership advancing a socialist and internationalist program—the Socialist Equality Party.

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