

Quebec government defends police assault on striking students, plans further repression

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Quebec's Liberal government has fiercely defended the Quebec Provincial Police's savage attack on a demonstration of striking students and their supporters last Friday. The attack left one student fighting for his life and several other protesters severely injured.

Last Friday's demonstration was mounted outside the Quebec Liberal Party's policy convention, which was moved to Victoriaville, a city of 40,000 located 150 kilometers from Montreal, in an attempt to prevent it from being targeted by the strike movement. Regardless, thousands of demonstrators travelled to Victoriaville to express their opposition to the government's plans to hike university tuition fees by more than 80 percent over the next seven years.

Using the pretext that certain individuals attempted to break through the security perimeter behind which the police were sheltering the Liberal Party meeting, the Quebec Provincial Police (QPP) brutally attacked the crowd with tear gas, truncheons and rubber bullets. Two young men suffered serious head trauma after being struck in the face by rubber bullets shot at close-range. One has lost an eye and the other remains in hospital in critical condition.

According to an article published in Tuesday's *La Presse*, a team of volunteer nurses had to treat about 400 injured protesters. Many of the injured had burns to the face and eyes, some had sprains or fractures. About 200 people had to be treated for tear gas inhalation.

Public Security Minister Robert Dutil rushed to defend the police's actions after protesters charged that the police had set upon them without giving a clear, audible order to disperse and after reporters from several media outlets expressed alarm over the police violence. "The Quebec Provincial Police," declared Dutil from the sidelines of Liberal convention, "have the duty to maintain order in our society. It has the right

to use necessary force to maintain order. ... A student is between life and death, which is terrible. But that is a risk that arises when there is violence like we saw yesterday." Saying perhaps more than he intended, Dutil then asserted that the police is "not a special class that is there to oppress the population."

Dutil's comments reprise the line that the authorities and the corporate media have taken since the student strike began thirteen weeks ago, with acts of petty vandalism invoked to justify systematic and increasingly violent police repression.

Parroting police propaganda, *La Presse* initially claimed that the serious injuries suffered by one of the young men on Friday could have been caused by projectiles thrown from within the crowd, although many eye-witnesses reported through social media that they had seen him struck by a rubber bullet.

Reporters from CUTV (Concordia University TV) who filmed the scene after the attack said that QPP officers refused to summon an ambulance for the injured students. When an ambulance that had been called by the demonstrators did approach, the police used the opportunity to intensify their efforts to break up the crowd—further delaying the injured students from getting to hospital.

These events took place as the leaders of the three province-wide student federations (FEUQ, FECQ, and CLASSE), accompanied and pressured by the presidents of Quebec three major union federations, were capitulating to the government and agreeing to a "settlement" that abandons the students' fight for education to be a social right and calls for the full implementation of the government's tuition fee hikes. (See: "Unions and student associations betray Quebec student strike")

In the middle of the negotiations, the government

seized on the police riot in Victoriaville to intimidate the student leaders. It demanded that they issue a public appeal for calm—thereby lending credence to the government’s slanderous claims that the student movement is “violent.” The government’s demand was amplified by the head of the Quebec Federation of Labour, who said his organization would repudiate its ostensible support for the students unless the student leaders bowed to the government’s demand. This they then did.

From the beginning of the conflict, the ruling class has used police repression to try to break resistance to the unpopular hike in tuition fees, a measure that is part of the broader austerity agenda of the Liberal government and the drive across Canada to make working people pay for the capitalist crisis.

Over the past month, the province’s courts have increasingly intervened against the student strike, issuing injunctions that limit and even ban picketing and legally compel universities and CEGEPs (pre-university and technical colleges) to provide classes at the demand of even a single student.

Mass mobilizations of students have prevented some of these injunctions from being implemented, causing increasing anxiety and anger in ruling class circles.

Last week, the head of the Quebec Superior Court, Chief Justice Francois Rolland, urged the province’s attorney-general and police forces to enforce the injunctions over students’ opposition—a policy that would require mass arrests and heightened violence as police forcibly break up student picket lines.

In addition to issuing this reactionary appeal, Rolland has personally taken in hand the issuing of injunctions against the students, travelling to various cities so that he could hear requests for court orders for an immediate resumption of classes. He urged administrators at Montmorency College and CEGEP Saint-Hyacinthe to call for police intervention, if his anti-strike injunctions are not respected. “We are in the twelfth hour, never mind the eleventh,” declared Dutil. “There is peril. Someone must intervene.”

The need to reestablish “order” through the coercive powers of the state was also voiced in an open letter, entitled “Choose University Excellence”, co-authored by prominent representatives of the political elite, big business, and the academy, including former Parti Quebecois Premier Lucien Bouchard.

“It is time we react,” reads the letter, “We must reinstate order ... This is a situation when, regardless of political allegiances, the population must support the state, which is ultimately responsible for the public order, the safety of individuals and the integrity of our institutions.”

Francois Legault, a former PQ Minister of Education and currently the leader of the right-wing Coalition Avenir Quebec (CAQ-Coalition for Quebec’s Future), deplored that “in Quebec, in 2012, the government makes a decision and we are not capable of respecting it.” He has called for police to be mobilized across Quebec next Monday so as to ensure that “every student who wants to go to school can do so.”

Meanwhile, the ruling class is already preparing new legal weapons in anticipation of future movements in opposition to its austerity agenda of social spending cuts, privatization, tariff-ication, regressive tax increases, and electricity rate and tuition fee increases. In Monday’s *La Presse*, its editor, Andre Pratte, argued that lawmakers must ask themselves, “should we restrict student unionism in order to assure that democratic laws are respected?”

The municipal government of Montreal, for its part, is preparing to adopt regulations that forbid the wearing of masks and make illegal any demonstration for which the route is not communicated to the police in advance.

Workers and students must be on guard. The ruling elite in Quebec, like its counterparts internationally, is increasingly unwilling to tolerate any opposition to its austerity program and is more than prepared to run roughshod over elementary democratic principles and use the coercive powers of the state to implement it.



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