

Quebec police mount mass arrests in bid to break student strike

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25 May 2012

After Tuesday's 150,000-strong demonstration supporting Quebec's striking students and opposing the provincial Liberal government's draconian Bill 78, the state has intensified its campaign of repression.

Police arrested almost 700 protesters in Montreal and Quebec City Wednesday evening.

Quebec City Police arrested 176 people for demonstrating in violation of the sweeping new restrictions Bill 78 places on protests. Passed in less than 24 hours late last week, Bill 78 makes all demonstrations—whatever their cause—illegal unless organizers submit to the police in writing more than eight hours in advance the demonstration itinerary and duration, and abide by any changes demanded by the police.

In Montreal, most of the arrests came when riot police suddenly turned on a peaceful three-hour protest, allegedly because demonstrators did not follow police instructions as to where they should proceed next. Having “kettled”—penned in and squeezed—the protesters, the police arrested all present, some 450 people. “The swift police action squeezed the mob together tighter and tighter as the officers advanced and some people begged to be let out,” reported the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. “One photographer was seen to be pushed to the ground and a piece of equipment was heard breaking.”

Those arrested in Montreal were not charged under Bill 78, which carries a minimum \$1,000 fine for a first offense, but under a municipal bylaw imposing less drastic penalties.

Also Wednesday, Quebec Public Security Minister Robert Dutil indicated that charges under Bill 78 may soon be laid against the student organization CLASSE and its leaders. CLASSE (The Broader Coalition of the Association for Student-Union Solidarity), which

represents about half of the over 150,000 striking students, has vowed not to submit to Bill 78. Shortly after Tuesday's march began it led tens of thousands on a route different from that set by police.

“This law must be applied,” said Dutil, adding that if CLASSE “has decided not to respect the law, then they'll have to live with that.” Dutil also criticized the Montreal police, which has invoked Bill 78's provision about prior approval of demonstrations to justify violently dispersing protests, but has thus far refrained from charging people with violating its draconian provisions.

Since Bill 78 passed last Friday, police across Quebec have arrested well over 1,000 striking students and their supporters on various charges, ranging from participating in an illegal assembly to resisting arrest. Several were charged with wearing a mask while demonstrating. The same day that Quebec's National Assembly adopted Bill 78, Montreal's City Council, also meeting in emergency session, adopted a new bylaw making it illegal to participate in a demonstration while wearing any form of face covering, including face paint, a hijab or a scarf.

The Liberal government hoped that Bill 78 would “shock and awe” the students, who have been striking for over 100 days against the government's plan to raise university tuition fees by 82 percent over the next seven years. Instead, the government's criminalization of the student strike and its blanket attack on the right to demonstrate have galvanized opposition to the government.

Significant numbers of workers participated in Tuesday's mammoth demonstration, although the official union delegations, which included teachers and Montreal blue-collar and transit workers, were relatively small.

In recent days there have been evening protests in many working class neighborhoods of Montreal announced by the clattering of pots.

The government, which initially dismissed further negotiations with the three province-wide student associations as futile, now claims to be open to further talks, while insisting that it will not discuss any changes to its tuition fee hike plan or of Bill 78. The student associations, CLASSE included, have nonetheless indicated that they are eager to resume discussions with the government, and back-channel talks are already underway.

The Canadian ruling class strongly supports the Liberal government's repressive measures against the students, viewing their opposition to the tuition fee hikes as an intolerable challenge to their drive to impose the burden of the world economic crisis on working people.

The tuition fee hikes are part of a battery of right-wing measures that the Liberal government of Jean Charest has implemented over the past two years, including steep social spending cuts, increased user-fees for public services, the imposition of a new health tax and hikes in already existing regressive taxes, and incremental privatization of health care.

With its March budget, the federal Conservative government cut federal discretionary spending by over 6 percent, raised the retirement age to 67, and rewrote Canada's unemployment insurance program so jobless workers can be press-ganged into accepting 30 percent wage cuts. Even before Canadian Pacific railway workers began their strike Wednesday, the Conservative government announced that it stands ready to pass an emergency strike-breaking law.

Prominent voices in the media are pressing for a confrontation with the students. Canada's most influential newspaper, the *Globe and Mail* criticized the Charest government for being too "soft." In its lead editorial Thursday, the *Globe*—owned by Canada's richest family, the Thomsons—wrote that the students "haven't lost anything yet. ... Until protesters and leaders feel the law's bite, it's hard to see how talks will lead anywhere but to a capitulation that will harm the province's universities and the province's long-term interests in resisting mob rule."

The *Globe* also denounced "outsiders" such as Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) President Sid

Ryan for supporting the students.

In reality, the Canadian trade unions have systematically isolated the Quebec student strike. Three weeks ago the presidents of Quebec's three major union federations prevailed upon the student leaders to accept a sell-out agreement that was subsequently massively repudiated by the students themselves. While striking students are defying state repression, the New Democratic Party (NDP)—the party supported by the unions in English Canada—has facilitated passage of the Ontario Liberal government's austerity budget.

That said, the *Globe*'s attempt to label Canadians from outside Quebec who support the students as "outsiders" speaks to their extreme fear that mass protests could spread beyond Quebec, Canada's only majority-French-speaking province, into English Canada and the United States. It exemplifies how the Canadian ruling class manipulates Canada's ethno-linguistic divide to try to split the working class and push through its reactionary policies.

But rather than make the student strike the catalyst for a mobilization of the working class across Quebec and Canada against the ruling class' austerity agenda, the student associations, including CLASSE, are trying to confine it to a single-issue protest, limited to Quebec, and with the aim of coming to terms with the Charest government.

Workers across Canada must intervene to ensure that the Quebec student strike is not broken and that Bill 78 does not stand, creating conditions for the ruling class to accelerate its austerity drive and criminalization of working class struggles.

This requires the development of an industrial and political offensive of the working class, organized independently of and in opposition to the pro-capitalist unions and NDP, to oppose all wage cuts and job cuts and the dismantling of public services.



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