

Second week of Canada-wide “casserole” protests

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Some 700 demonstrators participated in several neighbourhood “casserole” protests throughout the city of Toronto Wednesday evening as part of a cross-country show of solidarity with Quebec students striking against tuition fee hikes and a draconian government decree outlawing their protests. Hundreds more marched in Vancouver, with smaller demonstrations taking place in dozens of other Canadian cities. In Montreal, about 1,000 workers and youth took to the streets in the 44th consecutive night of protests in Quebec.

There were also demonstrations of a few hundred people in several cities outside Canada. A dozen people were arrested by police in Chicago for stepping off the sidewalk. Six more were arrested in New York. In both cities, police were taped shoving marchers as they aggressively herded them down narrow downtown streets.

The “casserole” demonstrations emerged last month in response to the Quebec Liberal government’s imposition of Bill 78, a draconian law that criminalizes the four-month-old province-wide student strike and places sweeping new restrictions on the right to demonstrate. The protests take the form of the banging of pots and pans by marchers and neighbourhood supporters, who appear on their porches to increase the cacophony. The form of protest derives from anti-government movements in Chile in the 1970s and 1980s and Argentina at the turn of the new century.

Reporters for the *World Socialist Web Site* attended the main neighbourhood march in west-central Toronto. The crowd of about 400 largely consisted of young people active in last year’s Occupy movement in the city, as well as various anarchist, social democratic and protest groups. Anyone attending the march looking for an analysis of the austerity drive by big business governments of all stripes and the way forward against these attacks would have been sorely disappointed.

No speeches were made before the march began. Organizers had no leaflet to hand out. Almost as soon as demonstrators started to arrive, drumming, whistle-blowing and the banging of pots took precedence over political

discourse amongst many of the participants.

Paul, a teenager from a local high school who was not affiliated with any participating group, asked our reporter over the growing noise, “Do you think they’re going to say anything? I mean, I was expecting someone to get up and maybe say what’s going on or what we should do next. All these drums and people dressed in masks and clown suits might be fun, but that’s really not the point, is it?”

Like the Occupy Wall Street movement that swept across the United States and then internationally last autumn, the determined opposition by Quebec students and their supporters against austerity measures and anti-democratic diktats has gained broad support amongst whole sections of the Canadian population. In Quebec, the protests have at times involved over 100,000 marchers. But the mantras of “no politics” and “no leadership,” repeated endlessly by those organizing the protests, are entirely compatible with the establishment politics of the big business parties. What they really mean is no *independent* politics, and no *independent* leadership.

This has a debilitating effect on those confronting government attacks. Workers and students have watched as the leaders of the three student organizations in Quebec, aided by the trade unions, negotiated a rotten deal with the Quebec government that accepted the Liberals’ demands for tuition hikes, only to have it voted down in militant student general assemblies. They have witnessed the New Democratic Party (NDP), the ostensible opposition in the federal parliament, declare its “neutrality” in the dispute, and they have seen the Quebec trade union bureaucrats cynically rail against the anti-protest law whilst agreeing to accept it.

Behind all the talk of “no leadership” lies the bankrupt perspective, unspoken by the movement organizers—at least in public—of a fall election that they hope will replace the big business Liberals with the Parti Quebecois, a party that when last in power implemented the most draconian attacks on social services ever seen in the province.

The entire experience to date contains important lessons.

Many who were initially attracted to the protests because they were looking for a way to fight against austerity have failed to find it. The turnout at Wednesday's cross-Canada "casseroles" was already smaller than the first effort a week ago, and participation has slumped in the most recent Quebec demonstrations. More and more young people are now confronted with the fact that a real oppositional movement must be developed on an entirely different basis—through the independent political mobilization of the working class against the capitalist system.

This was the perspective brought to the Toronto demonstration by supporters of the Socialist Equality Party (Canada). In our leaflet, "The Quebec student strike and the need for a socialist program", we stated: "The student strike has demonstrated that a struggle over any important social need or elementary democratic right brings youth and the working class into a frontal collision with the government, the state, its police and courts, and the entire capitalist social order. The working class faces a political struggle and the necessity of building a mass revolutionary socialist party to prosecute it.

"The Socialist Equality Party fights for the formation of independent committees of students and workers to organize systematic defiance of Bill 78, fight for the development of a cross-Canada and international working class counteroffensive against employer concessions demands and government austerity measures, and prepare working class action to bring down the Charest Liberal and Harper Conservative governments.

"These actions, vital as they are, can only serve to develop the unity, combativity and strength of the working class if they are conceived of and organized as part of the struggle for the independent political mobilization of the working class to fight for workers' governments and the socialist reorganization of society."

Reporters from the WSWs spoke with workers and youth at the protest.

Maria Gomes, a cleaner, had brought her entire family onto her front porch to join in the banging of pots and pans as the march passed by. "I'm so happy to see people starting to stand up against all these governments," she said. "I'm from Portugal and things are the same there. They are cutting everything. Soon there will be nothing left except for the rich people."

Steve, a video production worker, came out to support the demonstration because he believed in the broader cause. He told the WSWs: "It's the tip of the iceberg, isn't it? I believe this country and the world have gone the wrong way in the last 40 years. It started back in the '60s and '70s as sort of a boiling water syndrome, where things just got worse and worse over time. Most of the (mainstream) parties

don't represent my beliefs. Even the NDP doesn't really say the truth. They all are big business parties, and I guess with Mulcair they've really cast their die."

Melissa is a Toronto city worker who came out in support of the students and against government austerity. "I think austerity has gone far enough," she said. "I'm concerned enough about it to say, yeah, I'll walk the street, which is not my usual style. I'm old enough to see the direction things are going, so I think it's time. I look at the quality of life that my grandfather enjoyed in the 50s and 60s and how easily it came to him with just a high school education. And I compare that to now and what students are going through just to find a job."

Paola, who is doing post-doctoral work in Canada, comes from Madrid and sees what is taking place in Canada as connected to what is taking place in her own country. "Austerity is everywhere," she said. "It's not fair. I hope this might lead to revolution. Down with the 1 percent!"

"In my country they don't teach modern history in high schools because they're very careful about different ideologies. It's been 40 years since Franco died, but what is happening now?"

Brian, who works for the Taxi drivers' union, attended because he supports what the Quebec students are doing. He said: "I think the students have started up an anti-austerity movement across the province. It seems to be going in the right direction in Quebec and hopefully that will spread beyond their borders and people will start to push back against a right-wing government agenda that is trying to take away social programs that people rely on. Revolution would be a good start. All socialists should be revolutionary—not in name only."



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