

Thousands join protest in defiance of Quebec's Bill 78

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Twenty thousand people braved heavy rain Saturday afternoon to join a demonstration in Montreal held in defiance of the Quebec Liberal government's Bill 78 and in support of the province's striking students.

Rushed into law in less than 24 hours last month, Bill 78 effectively criminalizes the 17-week-long Quebec student strike and places sweeping restrictions on the right to demonstrate over any issue, anywhere in the province of Quebec.

In addition to students, there was strong representation from teachers, industrial workers, retirees and young families on Saturday's march. Many brought pots and pans to continue the so-called "casseroles" movement, a form of nightly neighbourhood protest that developed in several working-class neighbourhoods of Montreal in response to the imposition of Bill 78 and that has now spread across Quebec and to parts of English Canada.

Saturday's protest was called by CLASSE (The Broader Coalition of the Association for Student-Union Solidarity) in response to the government's decision last Thursday to suspend negotiations with it and the three other associations that represent Quebec's university and CEGEP (pre-university and technical college) students. During the four days of talks, the government refused to discuss suspending or repealing any of the provisions of Bill 78. It also insisted that university tuition fees must increase this fall and every year for the next seven years.

The government is determined to push through the tuition hikes as part of its drive to establish the so-called user-pay principle for public services. This principle is diametrically opposed to the concept that education, healthcare and other services should be social rights and is meant to pave the way for their privatization.

In a show of defiance, CLASSE refused to abide by Bill 78's stipulation that demonstration organizers must submit their itinerary to the police at least eight hours in advance of their protest's start and must follow any changes demanded by the police. "We want to keep the pressure on the government with a demonstration that goes against Bill 78," declared CLASSE spokesman Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois.

Faced with a massive wave of popular indignation and protests against Bill 78, the Quebec government and police have to date been selective in applying its draconian provisions. Montreal police did not intervene to break up Saturday's march, although over the course of the past four months they have repeatedly declared smaller protests "illegal assemblies" and violently dispersed crowds.

The day after the mammoth May 22 demonstration against Bill 78, Montreal riot police "kettled"—surrounded and squeezed—500 people, whom they then arrested en masse.

Since Bill 78's passage May 18, 1,500 striking students and their supporters have been arrested, most of them for the "crime" of demonstrating.

Although police did not intervene on Saturday, both they and the government have said that they reserve the right to lay charges in the future against those who have organized protests in defiance of Bill 78. The government is thus threatening to mount exemplary prosecutions against the leaders of CLASSE and other groups defying Bill 78 once it calculates it has successfully contained the wave of social contestation now breaking across the province.

CLASSE spokesman Nadeau-Dubois is already facing criminal prosecution for allegedly inciting defiance of a court injunction against mass picketing at Laval University in Quebec City.

The other student federations did not participate in Saturday's demonstration because it was not held in compliance with Bill 78.

Saturday's demonstration was also boycotted by the trade unions. The unions have denounced Bill 78 as an egregious attack on democratic rights, even comparing it to the imposition of the War Measures Act in 1970. But they have repeatedly said that they will comply with all its provisions. These provisions include the stipulation that the unions must take all steps within their power to ensure that teachers and other university and CEGEP employees comply with Bill 78—i.e. that they assist the government in breaking the student strike by performing all their normal functions and by penalizing students who continue to boycott classes when the suspended winter semester resumes in August.

Although professing support for the students, the unions have systematically sought to isolate the students' strike, while seeking to use it to promote support for their longtime political ally, the big-business Parti Quebecois. The social-democratic NDP, meanwhile, has professed "neutrality" in the fight between the students and the Charest Liberal government, declaring the issue of university tuition fees and Bill 78—legislation that establishes a new precedent for suppressing basic democratic rights—"provincial matters."

While CLASSE's defiance of Bill 78 is to be welcomed, it does so not from the standpoint of fighting for the mobilization of the working class in Quebec and across Canada against the class war agenda of the Charest Liberal and federal Conservative governments. Rather it seeks to pressure the government to return to the negotiating table, in pursuit of a single-issue protest strategy that deliberately separates the issue of the tuition fees from a challenge to the government's austerity program of social spending cuts, privatization and regressive tax and user-fee hikes.

"We are still open to negotiating with the government," declared Nadeau-Dubois on Saturday. Education Minister Michelle Courchesne "said she's open to dialogue," continued Nadeau-Dubois. "But it's she who slammed the door three days ago. The support is growing for the students' cause and the social crisis is heightening. I think it is time that the Liberals make

it a priority to resolve this conflict."

But the needs of the students and working class cannot be reconciled with the drive of big business to place the full burden of the global capitalist crisis on working people. Where the perspective of a "negotiated settlement" leads has already been demonstrated by the events of the past month. At the beginning of May, CLASSE and the other student associations negotiated a sellout agreement—subsequently repudiated by the students—that called for the government's 82 percent tuition fee hike to be imposed in full. Last week, in pursuit of an agreement with the government, the student associations abandoned their opposition to Bill 78 and accepted the government's reactionary fiscal framework. Ultimately, the negotiations collapsed only because Premier Charest and Education Minister Courchense wouldn't agree to a two-year tuition freeze to be followed by five years of fee hikes commensurate with those demanded by the government.

Supporters of the Socialist Equality Party and International Students for Social Equality intervened at Saturday's demonstration. They distributed a thousand copies of a statement explaining the necessity of making the student strike the catalyst for the independent political mobilization of the working class in Quebec and across Canada against all job, wage and social spending cuts and as part of an expanding struggle of the world working class against capitalism.



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