

“Casserole” protests in support of Quebec students spread across Canada

A WSWS reporting team
5 June 2012

A new form of protest, “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 whatever the cause.

Initially promoted by only a handful of individuals through social media, the call for people to congregate in their neighbourhoods and bang on pots and pans so as to support the striking students and oppose Bill 78 struck a chord. Over the course of a few days, the nightly casserole protest mushroomed across working class districts of Montreal. Thousands of people poured into the streets, defying the new restrictions on demonstrations and voicing their opposition to the Liberal government.

From such Montreal working class neighborhoods as Villeray and Rosemont, the casserole protests spread to the suburbs of Laval and Longueuil and Quebec’s other major urban centers. Within less than a week, casserole demonstrations were being organized even in remote mining towns like Sept-Isles and Rouyn-Noranda.

The government calculated that Bill 78 would intimidate the students and their supporters and enable it to bully the student associations into accepting a sellout agreement along the lines of that massively rejected by students at the beginning of last month. Instead, the draconian legislation has served to galvanize support for the students and opposition to the government. Those joining the casserole protests have raised numerous grievances, and not just with the provincial Liberal government and its austerity program. Many have wanted to express their opposition to the federal Conservative government, which is raising the age of retirement, slashing jobless benefits and shredding workers’ rights, and to big business’ vice-like domination of socioeconomic life.

Even the corporate media now concedes that the student strike has gone far beyond the issue of university tuition fee hikes and become a *débat de société*—a debate over the direction in which society is heading. In Quebec and Canada, as in all the advanced capitalist countries, social inequality and economic insecurity have been increasing for decades. And now, in response to the greatest crisis of world capitalism since the Great Depression, the ruling elite is seeking to destroy all

the remaining social gains of working people and turning towards authoritarian measures like Bill 78 to suppress popular opposition.

Last Wednesday the “casserole” protests spread for the first time beyond Quebec. Dubbed “Casserole Night in Canada”, thousands of students and working people were mobilized, largely through a 72-hour Facebook campaign, to gather with their pots and pans in cities from coast to coast. Organizers hope to rally supporters in a regular Wednesday night campaign throughout the summer to support the Quebec student strike, oppose tuition fee hikes across Canada, build opposition to the federal Conservative government, and denounce Bill 78 and other attacks on democratic measures.

Last Wednesday, more than a thousand people marched through working class neighbourhoods in Vancouver. In Toronto, several feeder marches from various areas of the city converged in the west downtown area. At its height, the protest gathered some 2,000 participants. Along the way, protestors were warmly greeted by passersby and by families coming out of their houses and apartments.

Demonstrations of hundreds of student-strike supporters proceeded through the streets of dozens of smaller cities and towns including Halifax, St. John’s, Kingston, Guelph, Hamilton, Winnipeg, Regina, Calgary, Dawson City and Victoria. In several cities, high school students held day-time rallies in front of their schools.

Below the *World Socialist Web Site* publishes two reports on the casserole protests. The first is a report from Longueuil, a south shore suburb of Montreal. The second, which is from Kingston, Ontario, was drafted by members of the local chapter of the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE).

LONGUEUIL: Casserole protests began here on May 23, the day after the mammoth protest against Bill 78 in Montreal. Each night a crowd of 80 to several hundred people has gathered and marched through Vieux (Old) Longueuil.

One evening last week, we interviewed several participants.

Alain Saint-Amant, a writer, came with his wife and two children. Asked what he thought of the student strike and Bill 78, he said. These events “have shown how the government is at the service of large corporations and Wall Street. What started as a student issue has become a social cause, as our

fundamental rights are attacked and people resist every day everywhere in Quebec—and that is the good news.”

Saint-Amant was critical of both the Liberals and the Official Opposition Parti Quebecois, which is feigning support for the students. “The PQ,” he said, “is a bourgeois party working for the same moneyed interests as the Liberals. Instead, we need to have left parties that fight and that are not afraid of words. We must have proportional representation and the possibility of sending our candidates to the National Assembly to represent us.

“If the unions had really lived up to what is expected of them, they would have jumped into the fight. And there would not have been 200,000 [demonstrators March 22]; there would have been two million.”

Jean-François, an unemployed worker, was also critical of both the Liberals, whom he called “copy-pasters for the Chambers of Commerce,” and the PQ. He expressed some sympathy for Quebec Solidaire, which describes itself as a left, Quebec nationalist party, but which has repeatedly offered to collaborate with the big business PQ.

“Mankind,” said Jean-François, “is governed by an oligarchy of billionaires. In Canada, Desmarais, Péladeau represent these oligarchs. They have so hogged all the Earth’s resources that at some point, it is normal that people are waking up.”

Ulises, a student at CÉGEP Rosemont, told the WSWS: “Education should be free. Increases [in tuition fees] adversely affect society. Some will not be able to study, and even those who do will have no guarantee of finding a job in their field and they will have a huge debt.

“Bill 78 has no place in a democratic country. It is contrary to human rights. I hope that it will disappear as soon as possible.

“People are realizing that the government does not represent us.”

Mélanie, a single mother and UQAM (University of Quebec at Montreal) student, has been joining the “casserole” demonstrations in Longueuil on a nightly basis.

“The [tuition fee] increase is unacceptable,” she told the WSWS. “The funds are there. They are just poorly managed as with *l’ilot voyageur* [a failed UQAM real estate venture]. We need a moratorium [on the fee hikes] to find out where the money is going. Then, if necessary, we can pay the increases.

“As for Bill 78, it affects the human rights of all workers, and all union members.

“All that is happening now with the Greek debt, is capitalism at its worst [à son paroxysme]. Banks lend money to these states to profit off the interest. Afterwards they say, ‘Pay us back or we’ll throw you down a hole.’ This payback is through austerity measures, unemployment, plant closures, etc. It’s the people, once again, who pay for capitalism’s savagery.

KINGSTON: Well over 100 people, including both students and workers, congregated in McBurney Park (popularly known as Skeleton Park) in a traditionally working class neighbourhood, last Wednesday to show their support for the

Quebec student strike. We marched down the main street towards city hall, then returned to Skeleton Park.

The turnout for the event was significant, as there are few such activities in Kingston, and indicates a growing recognition of the importance of the Quebec student strike and of the need for a cross-Canada movement against the austerity measures being pursued by governments of all stripes.

The nature of the protest, however, appeared orchestrated to limit political discussion and debate to the absolute minimum. There were no speeches before or after the march and only a handful of banners were present. In addition to an ISSE banner, there was a flag from the Public Service Alliance of Canada, the public service union that represents Queen’s University teaching assistants and fellows, and a banner for the Kingston Coalition Against Poverty (KCAP).

ISSE members distributed 50 copies of a recent *World Socialist Web Site* Perspective entitled “Mass repression in Quebec: A warning to the working class”. ISSE members also gave an interview to CFRC, the local campus radio station.

In this interview, the ISSE insisted on the national and international significance of the strike in Quebec and the anti-democratic response of the provincial Liberal government.

Rejecting the uncritical support that Occupy Kingston, the anarchist-dominated group that called the march, has given to the government-accredited student associations, the ISSE explained that the student strike needs to become the catalyst for the mobilization of the working class across-Canada against all job, wage and public service cuts and with a view to developing an ever-expanding struggle against capitalism worldwide.



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