Quebec legislator arrested as state repression of student strike continues

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Quebec City police arrested 65 people, including Amir Khadir, Québec Solidaire's lone member of the provincial parliament, Tuesday evening. Their crime? Demonstrating illegally—that is, without police permission.

Tuesday's arrests are part of an ongoing campaign of state repression directed against the four month-long Quebec student strike and the mass opposition that has erupted against the provincial Liberal government's Bill 78. Adopted May 18, Bill 78 criminalizes the student strike and places sweeping restrictions on the right to demonstrate over any issue, anywhere in Quebec.

Khadir and all of those arrested with him Tuesday were handcuffed and transported to a police station where they were forced to identify themselves and subjected to police checks. They were given $494 tickets for violating the Highway Code, on the spurious grounds that the protest was interfering with traffic.

Fearful of the mass opposition to Bill 78, police authorities have been highly selective in its application. Frequently they have chosen to charge people arrested for participating in an "illegal assembly" under municipal bylaws and the Highway Code rather than Bill 78. But both the government and police have said that they reserve the right to lay charges under the punitive provisions of Bill 78 at a later date. Quebec's emergency law makes persons who participate in a demonstration that has not been police-approved liable to criminal prosecution and minimum fines of $1,000. Demonstration organizers face minimum fines of $7,000.

The Liberal government was quick to endorse the Quebec City Police's arrest of the parliamentarian Khadir, providing further proof of its contempt for democratic rights. Transport Minister Norm Macmillan accused Khadir of seeking publicity by getting himself arrested. "What he wants is what you're doing now—talking about him."

In fact, as Khadir explained at a press conference Wednesday, his arrest was anything but planned. While biking home from the National Assembly, he happened upon a *casserole* (pots and pans) protest and decided to join it. When police declared the peaceful protest illegal, he ignored them, arguing that the right to demonstrate is constitutionally protected.

Khadir said that his arrest and handcuffing had been a humiliation, even if the police had not been abusive to him. "What I deplore," said Khadir, "is that there were orders [to illegalize the demonstration and make mass arrests] from the police top command who are allowing themselves to serve as a tool of the government."

Khadir is the co-leader of Québec Solidaire, which promotes itself as a "left" Quebec *souverainiste* (pro-independence) "citizens" party. While it claims to oppose the big business Parti Quebecois, it has repeatedly proposed an electoral alliance with the Quebec elite's alternate party of government in the name of fighting the "right."

Following the passage of Bill 78, Khadir suggested that the legislation was so draconian that it raised the question as to when civil disobedience is permissible. These remarks were vehemently denounced by the corporate media and by the other parties in the National Assembly, with many questioning the "fitness" of someone serving in the legislature who isn't ready to obey its laws. Québec Solidaire then beat a hasty retreat, declaring that it would not and could not counsel defiance of Bill 78.

This remains its position and no doubt accounts for its meek, pro-forma protest over Khadir's arrest and handcuffing for participating in a peaceful protest—an outrageous action that has once again demonstrated the government's readiness to run roughshod over basic democratic rights.

In recent days, the government, corporate media and big business have been mounting a propaganda offensive

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against the student strike focusing on the claim that student protests constitute a threat to Montreal's tourist industry. Premier Jean Charest himself led the charge, labeling one of the student association's a "menace" to Quebec on the basis of the concocted claim that it had threatened to disrupt this weekend's Montreal Grand Prix. The transparent aim of this campaign is to bully the students and opponents of the government's flagrant attack on democratic rights into silence. Failing that, the propaganda campaign is aimed at providing the pretext for the state suppression of protests through mass arrests and violence. Since the adoption of Bill 78 over 1,500 people have been arrested, most for the "crime" of demonstrating.

Also Tuesday Education Minister Michele Courchesne rejected any further talks with the student associations. Last Thursday the government broke off negotiations, because the student associations were balking at its demand that university tuition fees must increase this September and every year for the next seven years.

Egged on by the Canadian ruling elite, the Liberal government is determined to impose its schedule of massive university tuition fee hikes for two reasons: to intimidate opponents of its austerity program and because the fee hikes exemplify its drive to make the "user pay" principal for public services the new "norm" in Quebec, so as to slash social spending and pave the way for privatization.

"There are no negotiations planned." Courchesne told reporters Tuesday. "Absolutely not."

"If they [the students associations] do not agree to move on the [tuition] Increase, we are in a dead-end."

The Liberal government and the Canadian ruling class as a whole have been shaken by the tenacity of the striking students and the depth and breadth of the opposition to Bill 78. Their greatest fear is that the strike could become a catalyst for a mass movement of the working class in Quebec and across Canada against their drive to place the burden of the capitalist crisis on working people through job cuts, contract concessions, and the dismantling of public services.

Having failed to break the strike through court injunctions and police violence in April and Bill 78 in May, the government now hopes to wear down students' resistance, while continuing to brandish the threat of still greater repression and police violence, especially when it tries to resume the suspended winter semester in August.

Above all it is relying on the unions, the NDP, Québec Solidaire, and the student associations to isolate the students—restricting their struggle to a single issue protest aimed at pressuring the government to reduce its tuition fee hikes and confined to Quebec.

At the beginning of last month, Quebec's major labor federations prevailed on the student associations to accept a sellout agreement that was subsequently massively repudiated by students and no sooner was Bill 78 adopted than they announced they would comply with all its provisions.

Earlier this week Courchesne met with the presidents of the Confederation of National Trade Unions (CNTU) and of the CNTU affiliate, FNEEQ, that represents teachers at the strike-closed CEGEPs (pre-university and technical colleges) to discuss the government's plans to have the suspended winter semester completed in a compressed time frame in August and September. The unions' participation in these talks, which concern how Bill 78 is to be implemented, underscore that they stand prepared to assist the government in breaking the student strike.

The unions are arguing that teachers should be compensated for what will be a dramatically increased workload during the proposed compressed semester and so they should. But to entertain discussion on this when Bill 78 hangs over the heads of students and teachers alike is a crass betrayal: the law compels teachers under the threat of criminal sanction to assist the government in breaking students' boycott of classes, and stipulates the unions must do everything in the power to ensure that teachers do the government's bidding.

The Quebec student strike and the growing working class opposition to Bill 78 have demonstrated the chasm that exists between the interests and aspirations of working people and big business and its political representatives and revealed the potential for a challenge to the elite's class war agenda. But if this potential is to be realized, the student strike must become the spearhead for a cross-Canada mobilization of the working class, independent of and in opposition to the pro-capitalist trade unions and NDP, against all job and wage cuts and in defence of public services and as part of a widening offensive of the international working class against capitalism.

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