

Quebec artists denounce governments' smear campaign against student strike

Keith Jones
14 June 2012

More than 2,500 writers, filmmakers, actors, and others active in the arts in Quebec have signed an open letter to Quebec Culture Minister Christine St. Pierre demanding that she retract her claim that the four-month-long student strike is “violent.”

Commenting on Quebec singer-storyteller Fred Pellerin's decision to decline a government award so as to show solidarity with the striking students, St. Pierre declared last Friday, “We know what the red square”—the symbol of the strike—“means. It means intimidation, violence. It also means stopping people from studying.”

“We find ourselves today obliged to ask you to make a public apology for these demagogic remarks,” declares the open letter, which has been published on the website of *Le Devoir*, a newspaper close to the Official Opposition Parti Québécois. Signatories of the letter include playwright and novelist Michel Tremblay, arguably Quebec's most celebrated writer, film-maker Léa Pool, film and theater director Martin Faucher, novelist Marie-Claire Blais, and actors Sylvie Drapeau and Normand Chouinard.

The letter accuses St. Pierre of seeking to “debase” the public debate surrounding the students' struggle for accessible post-secondary education and of dishonestly discrediting the red square “which you well know the great majority of those active in this [the artistic-cultural] milieu wear proudly.”

The letter says Quebec is witnessing a battle between “humanist culture” and “a business culture that is assaulting free thought,” then declares, “If the only argument you've decided to address to this profound ideological schism is a recourse to fear to justify the necessity of maintaining order, we insist on reminding you that this game is extremely dangerous.” In a reference to the federal government's imposition of the War Measures Act in 1970 on the grounds that Quebec was facing an “apprehended insurrection, the letter adds, “To

raise the old scarecrows of fear at the service of order brings back terrible memories of a not-so-distant history.”

Responding directly to St. Pierre's allegations of violence, the letter says: “You like to ‘forget’ that this word which so frequently comes to your lips is not embodied in the hundreds of thousands of people, students and citizens, that walk each night on our streets, but by a police force that shamefully multiplies its acts of brutality against peaceful demonstrators.”

Speaking in the National Assembly Tuesday, St. Pierre refused to offer any apology and instead repeated her smears against the striking students. “We all have seen that there have been student demonstrations that sometimes have led to disgraceful scenes of intimidation,” she proclaimed. Jean-Marc Fournier, the Liberal government's House Leader, went even further, associating the student strike with acts of public mischief committed by unknown persons, including the sending of letters to various Liberal politicians and media outlets containing a harmless powder—an act purportedly carried out by a hitherto unheard of group, the *Forces armées révolutionnaires du Québec* (Armed Revolutionary Forces of Quebec.)

Yesterday, St. Pierre pretended to offer an apology, while in fact perpetuating the lie that the student strike is violent. “If there are people who feel hurt by my comments, I apologize,” said the minister. “...Some people who wear the red square don't want to send a message of violence and intimidation. But there are many Quebecers who have witnessed totally disgraceful scenes of people wearing the red square.” Later in a letter to journalists St. Pierre claimed that the symbol of the student strike had been subjected to a “takeover” by “vandals,” thereby associating it with “acts of violence.”

Since the first days of the student strike, the government and the corporate media have sought to delegitimize the students' struggle against university tuition fee hikes by

depicting it as violent. In fact, Quebec has been witness to an unprecedented campaign of police violence, with police routinely attacking peaceful demonstrations with baton charges, sound bombs and tear gas and provoking violence with aggressive and arbitrary acts.

On Friday, May 4, as student leaders were negotiating with the government, the Quebec Provincial Police staged a brutal attack on a demonstration outside a Liberal Party convention in Victoriaville, repeatedly firing rubber bullets into the crowd. There is little doubt this police violence was orchestrated by the government, so as to enable it to intimidate the students leaders. The government brazenly threatened to cut off the negotiations, if the students leaders, who were surrounded by security guards and effectively prevented from communicating with those not participating in the talks, did not immediately condemn the “rioters” in Victoriaville.

Two weeks later, the government adopted Bill 78—legislation that criminalizes the student strike and places sweeping new restrictions on the right to demonstrate over any issue anywhere in Quebec. Since its passage, well over 1,500 people, including Quebec Solidaire legislator Amir Khadir, have been arrested for the “crime” of demonstrating. And during last weekend’s Grand Prix, police targeted persons wearing the red square for search and identification checks, denying them access to parts of the subway system, and carrying out the preventive arrest of more than 30 student activists.

Motivating this campaign of state repression is the recognition of the government and Canadian ruling elite that the student strike constitutes a challenge to their drive to place the burden of the capitalist crisis on working people and their fear that the strike could become a catalyst for the eruption of working class opposition to the dismantling of public services and wage and job-cutting.



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