

# Quebec government criminalizes student strike

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The Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM) was the target of a massive intervention by riot police April 8 that was aimed at intimidating, beating up, and arresting students who were exercising their democratic right to strike on the university campus. The police repression is well documented in videos posted on YouTube by amateur journalists and strike supporters.

According to press reports, Quebec Liberal Premier Philippe Couillard personally contacted the rector of UQAM to demand the police crackdown.

The police invasion of a public educational institution is virtually without precedent in Quebec. It is part of an escalating campaign of state repression mounted by the Liberal government with the full support of Quebec's big-business elite. The government is determined to break the student protest movement against its sweeping austerity program and to put an end to Quebec's longstanding democratic tradition of political protest through student strikes.

This authoritarian drive is above all directed against the working class—at demonstrating that the government will mobilize the apparatus of state repression to criminalize any challenge to its program of brutal social spending cuts, user fee hikes, and wage and pension cuts for public sector workers.

The April 8 confrontation began when security guards, recently hired by UQAM, accosted and jostled a group of thirty students who were enforcing the strike mandate democratically decided by their officially recognized student association by seeking to prevent the holding of classes. With the security guards threatening further repression, the students complied with the guards' demand that they vacate the premises.

A few hours later, however, police intervened massively and provocatively against a second group of striking students who were demonstrating on the UQAM campus. Fearing the police would seize on this as the occasion to mount a violent crackdown, a group of professors attempted to position themselves between the police and the students. In the end, the police arrested 21 people, aged 18 to 36, who have been charged with misdemeanors and unlawful assembly.

Later that evening, some 200 students decided to occupy the J.-A.-DeSève building to protest the police intervention on the campus and the subsequent arrests. They barricaded the

building entrance with tables and chairs in a festive atmosphere. During the ensuing four hours, a handful of students committed acts of petty vandalism, leading to tensions with the vast majority of the students who were occupying the building peacefully.

Shortly after midnight and with the express approval of the UQAM administration, police forcibly ended the occupation. Montreal riot police broke down a glass door with axes and charged into the building. The students escaped out a rear exit, but were then chased for several hours by police who fired tear gas at them. Five people were arrested.

The police interventions at UQAM, including the brutal manner in which they ended the occupation, were emphatically supported by Premier Couillard. The corporate media and the entire political establishment, including the Parti Québécois, were quick to echo Couillard's remarks, denouncing the students as "violent." Turning reality on its head, they depicted the state repression as the consequence of the striking students' "unacceptable behavior." In the face of this slander campaign, the supposedly left-wing Québec Solidaire simply called for dialogue so as to "prevent an undesirable escalation" of the situation.

Nothing was said in all of this about the government's antidemocratic campaign to criminalize the strike and even more importantly about its brutal austerity measures, which target essential public services on which millions of Quebecers depend and the social rights that workers won through bitter struggles over several generations. If truth be told, the real authors of violence and intimidation are sitting in the Quebec National Assembly and in the editorial offices of the big-business media.

Throughout the strike, which was launched March 23 with the goal of pressuring the Liberals to backtrack on their austerity measures, UQAM Rector Robert Proulx has stoked the flames. At the government's urging, he obtained a Superior Court injunction that makes it illegal for students to block access to classes. He also announced the unprecedented expulsion of nine students involved in student walkouts and other protest actions over the last two years. On April 7, he sent out an e-mail announcing that the academic calendar would not be changed and ordering all professors and contract teachers to continue

teaching their courses even if their classrooms were empty. Despite many requests from the striking students, the rector has consistently refused all dialogue with them.

Whilst the media has made much of the fact that some striking UQAM students have donned masks, this was in response to the administration's installation of numerous additional CTCT cameras and its hiring, at a cost of \$500,000, of a large number of additional security guards from the private firm Gardium so as to surveille and police students.

The few acts of vandalism carried out on April 8 were likely the actions of a handful of anarchists—possibly linked to the Black Bloc—whose sole aim was to bring about a confrontation with the police. There is a long history of police infiltration of these anarchist groups and numerous cases of *agent s provocateurs* inciting young people to commit illegal acts. On the evening of the occupation, vehicles belonging to the Montreal police (SPVM) were left unsupervised near the entrance to the university, where they could be readily vandalized.

The Parti Québécois, the federation that represents the CEGEPS (pre-university and technical colleges) and several student associations and trade unions have responded to the events at UQAM by calling for a law “framing” students’ right to strike. Such legislation would be utterly reactionary. As its proponents suggest, it would be based on the Quebec labor code, which ties state recognition of the unions to sweeping limitations on workers’ right to strike, in some cases barring it altogether. The purpose of any law “framing” students’ right to strike would be to introduce a whole series of legal obstacles to prevent it from being exercised and to justify the repression of student protests.

The Liberals however want nothing to do with this proposal. Throughout the conflict, they have aggressively asserted that there is no such thing as a student right to strike, underscoring that their objective is to change the rules of the game and repudiate student strikes as an accepted form of political protest. Indeed, Education Minister François Blais has publicly deplored that student strikes have been accepted as a legitimate form of democratic action in Quebec since the 1960s. He has repeatedly avowed that the only “right” the government is constitutionally bound to uphold is students’ “right” to attend classes in defiance of a democratically decided class boycott.

The hard line taken by the government is a serious warning for the working class. The repressive measures directed at the students are only a foretaste of what the government is preparing to suppress worker opposition to its austerity program, including from the half-million public sector workers whose contracts expired March 31 and from whom the government is demanding sweeping concessions.

In the face of this threat, the trade unions are doing nothing to mobilize their members and prepare a counteroffensive. Just as they did during the 2012 student strike, the unions have refused to support the students, facilitating the government repression.

At a major conference on March 31, the public sector union leaders insisted that their preoccupation is “good-faith” bargaining with the government and that not before the fall will they even begin to seriously consider resorting to the “ultimate” measure—by which they mean a legal strike.

Despite the fact that the student “anti-austerity” strike has drawn into its ranks tens of thousands of students across Quebec over the course of the past month—and at the beginning of this week as many as 20,000 students remained on strike—it is clearly petering out.

There is still broad opposition to the ruling class’s austerity agenda among the students, and even more so in the working class. However, none of the factions of ASSÉ (Association for Student-Union Solidarity), which as in 2012 is leading the student strike, has presented a viable perspective for social struggle.

The more “conservative” faction, which includes many Quebec Solidaire supporters, continues to subordinate itself completely to the trade unions and after the union officialdom spelled out their forthright opposition to any mobilization of the working class called for a “strategic retreat”—i.e. the strike’s end. The other faction, apparently more “radical,” has pressed for the continuation of the strike, but is making no effort to mobilize workers in the fight against austerity, limiting themselves to futile appeals to the ruling elite.

Like the unions, both wings of the ASSÉ leadership claim the draconian measures of the Couillard government are an “ideological choice,” not the consequence of a systemic crisis of capitalism that the ruling elite in Canada, as around the world, is seeking to resolve at the expense of the working class.

The only viable option to counter austerity is a turn to the international working class, the only social force with the power to break the stranglehold of big business over socioeconomic life, overthrow the profit system, and transform society on the basis of human need. The development of an independent political movement of the working class requires an intransigent struggle against the pro-capitalist union bureaucracy, which subordinates workers to the political representatives of the ruling class and binds them to capitalism.

*This author also recommends:*

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