Thousands of students protest in Montreal against the high cost of living and education cuts

Our reporters
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A week-long student strike that disrupted several Quebec universities and CEGEPs (pre-university and technical colleges) from November 9 to 13 culminated in a demonstration of thousands of students in Montreal last Friday.

On that day, approximately 100,000 students were on strike across Quebec to protest the lack of resources for education, precarious living conditions and the high cost of living.

The strike was organized by the *Coalition de résistance pour l'unité étudiante syndicale* (Coalition of Resistance for Student Union Unity, CRUES), a grouping of student associations described as more "militant," which represents approximately 35,000 students. Together with other student unions, CRUES is demanding "reform of student financial aid," paid internships and "reinvestment in post-secondary institutions" to counter years of social cuts and mounting student debt.

The protest movement in Quebec is taking place against the backdrop of mass student mobilizations in Europe against austerity and war, which have won the support of and set in motion significant sections of the working class—including one-day general strikes in France and Spain. Students in Ontario, who face attacks on public education by Doug Ford's Progressive Conservative government, also protested on November 5, advancing similar demands.

Responding to CRUES's call, thousands of students gathered Friday afternoon at Victoria Square in downtown Montreal. The atmosphere was lively and festive. Demonstrating the internationalization of the student struggle, a roving band performed "J'ai deux passions, la fanfare, la révolution" ("I have two passions: the brass band and revolution"), which has become something of an anthem of the youth protests in France.

However, the mood was marred by a large deployment of officers from the City of Montreal Police (SPVM), intended to intimidate, harass and repress the young demonstrators. Students who subsequently spoke to CBC accused the police of unleashing tear gas without warning and beating protesters. "No one was prepared for how it was going to go," an 18-year-old student who suffered an injured leg said. "They threw so much gas in so little time." Explaining how she was injured, she added, "The police pushed someone, and that person fell on me. Despite the fact that we were still on the floor and couldn't get up, the police would still push us with their shields." Another student suffered a broken nose after she was struck in the face by a police shield.

The trade unions largely ignored CRUES's appeal for support from "civil society," confining themselves to a few vapid statements of verbal support on social media. None of the major unions or union federations deigned to send delegations to the demonstration, leaving students isolated in the face of the state repression. No official contingent from the "left" parliamentary party Québec Solidaire (QS) was visible, with only a few of its leaders taking part in the march, including co-spokesperson Ruba Ghazal.

Supporters of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the *World Socialist Web Site* intervened at the demonstration to speak with young people and distribute a statement calling on Quebec students to turn to the working class and link the struggle against capitalist austerity with opposition to Canada's massive rearmament for imperialist war.

While CRUES restricts its horizons to the single issue of post-secondary education in Quebec and conceives the struggle as a mere protest addressed to Quebec's ruling elite, the SEP advanced a diametrically opposed

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revolutionary perspective. Its statement explained: “Students must instead turn to the only social force capable of offering a progressive way out of the capitalist crisis: the working class, mobilized as an independent political force, in a counter-offensive to defend wages, public services and a genuine future for young people.”

Despite the illusions some young people had in CRUES’s pressure politics, the SEP’s perspective resonated with those they met.

Asked why young people and students were simultaneously protesting in Europe, Quebec and Ontario around similar demands, Nathan replied, “Politicians all defend capital.” Two female CEGEP students listening to the exchange said they agreed with his response.

The discussion then turned to developments in the United States. Nathan initially expressed hope that the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) could “push the Democratic Party to the left.” After further discussion, he acknowledged that the Democrats, like Quebec’s ruling Parti Québécois, are hostile to the aspirations of young people and workers because, in his words, “They all defend the capitalist system and the wealthiest.”

The protesters set off at around 3 p.m., following a route that had not been provided to police in advance. The march made several left turns as students chanted, “To the left, to the far left.” The situation quickly deteriorated when police, who were only waiting for a pretext to repress the movement, announced over loudspeakers that the march had been declared illegal after a few individuals lit smoke flares.

The riot squad, which had been on a war footing from the outset, immediately arrived on the scene, and a skirmish broke out near the Palais des Congrès, Montreal’s convention centre. Police indiscriminately fired tear gas and carried out shield charges against the peaceful crowd on the pretext that protesters had thrown projectiles—rocks, cans, etc.

Vans packed with officers then carried out maneuvers to split up and disperse the crowd. At least three people were arrested. Videos circulated on social media showing the former QS co-spokesperson Manon Massé and other protesters being sprayed directly in the face with pepper spray. According to the FCEQ and UEQ student associations, “15 people were hospitalized and dozens were injured” in the police violence.

Police justified their intervention on the basis of a law purportedly intended to “promote public safety,” passed last April by the former CAQ government with the support of the Parti Québécois. Among other things, the draconian law prohibits possessing or throwing “pyrotechnic objects” during a demonstration.

Unsurprisingly, the mainstream media sought to blame students for the police violence. After hypocritically noting that “students have every right to protest,” Stéphanie Grammond, chief editorial writer at the daily *La Presse*, accused CRUES of “looking for a fight” and encouraging “vandalism, as in France.”

At the start of the student strike, Paul St-Pierre Plamondon’s newly-elected PQ government claimed to be “sympathetic to the concerns expressed by the student movement” and “open to dialogue.” The government’s real intentions are quite different. During a telephone call last month with France’s “president of the rich,” Emmanuel Macron, St-Pierre Plamondon condemned the “unrest fomented by the far left” in France and offered “the full support and solidarity of the Government of Quebec.” Last Friday, following in Macron’s footsteps in France, the PQ responded to students’ demands not with “dialogue,” but with police brutality.

Although the student strike is officially over, the struggle of workers and young people against capitalist austerity and rearmament is set to intensify in the coming period.

CRUES, however, advances a perspective doomed to failure: that of a large protest aimed at “forcing” the big-business government to “change its mind.” Its representative, who addressed the crowd on Friday, denounced student “precarity,” rents that are “increasingly unaffordable,” and financial aid that “keeps us below the poverty line,” before concluding with a call to “launch an unlimited general student strike” in 2027.

But she omitted what was essential, paying no attention to the rebellion of European youth, which has served as a catalyst for a movement of the working class and thus pointed the way forward. As emphasized in the SEP statement, students will be able to defend public education only as part of a broad, independent political mobilization of the working class, on an international scale, against the profit system as a whole. This requires a break with the nationalist and pro-capitalist union bureaucracy, which systematically stifles workers’ struggles.

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