

Government Repression of Quebec Student Movement Sparks Massive Protests

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Quebec's student movement and the swelling ranks of its popular allies staged a massive rally and march in Montreal on May 22 in favour of the students' fight for free, quality public education and against government repression. Estimates by some mainstream news outlets and by independent observers place the number of participants as high as 400,000. It was the largest social protest in Canadian history and amounted to a massive display of civil disobedience against a special law adopted by the Quebec government four days earlier that aims to break a more than three-month long strike of post-secondary students in the province.



Lead banners on the march read, "100 days of strike, 100 days of (government) contempt!" and "Block the sexist tuition fee hike!" A massive banner of the militant, CLASSE student association was carried overhead by hundreds of marchers and read, "May 22: This is only the beginning!"

Contingents of teachers, professors, high school students, public service workers and other trade unionists joined the march. Marchers bused into Montreal from across the province while people streamed into the city center from neighbourhoods throughout the metropolitan region. French-language media termed the march a "monster" demonstration. Montreal's English language daily covered its front page with an aerial photo of the march and a headline reading "River of Red," referring to the symbolic colour of the student movement (symbolizing student indebtedness) that was omnipresent that day.

Leaders of the three largest student associations held an impromptu press conference along the route of the march. Léo Bureau-Blouin of the association of junior college (CEGEP) students (the FECQ) told journalists, "We are united today in this huge demonstration aiming not only to mark 100 days of the strike but also to denounce the Charest (Quebec) government and the course of events following its decision to choose repression over discussion..."

Referring to the draconian Bill 78 that was adopted by Quebec's National Assembly on May 18 and that effectively proscribes the right of students to strike and to protest, Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois, a leader of CLASSE, the largest of the student federations, told reporters that the law is "absurd and unenforceable. The proof of that is here today, where the street is speaking forcefully." Challenging Quebec's minister of public security, he stated, "If the minister wants to be true to his law, he will have to levy fines on tens of thousands of people."

Cops Wield Truncheons and Handcuffs

The students are on strike to block a proposed 75 per cent hike in post-secondary tuition fees over the next seven years. Many consider their fight to be one front in a broader struggle for a society of social and environmental justice.

François-Xavier Clermont, a student at CEGEP du Vieux-Montréal, told the Montreal daily *La Presse*, “We are fighting against the tuition hike, but we’re also fighting against the Northern Plan (a proposal by the Quebec government to expand natural resource exploitation in the vast, north of the province) and against this corrupt government.” He continued, “We have succeeded in opening up a debate over the future of Quebec society. This is already a victory.”

The government of Premier [Jean Charest](#) has made an apparent about-face in agreeing to resume talks with the student associations on May 28. But this comes on the heels of a massive escalation of repression in the preceding days, so the government’s intent is not clear.

During the evening of May 23, provincial and municipal police forces arrested 518 protesters in Montreal and 150 in Quebec City. Thirty six were arrested two nights earlier in Sherbrooke. The number of arrests in Montreal that evening exceeds those during the infamous declaration of [martial law](#) by the Canadian government in October 1970.

Police held the arrested Montreal protesters in buses overnight. The cops had declared an evening protest “illegal” under municipal regulations. One young woman who was detained told CBC Radio that police acted like “animals.” The detainees were denied bathroom access and one man who suffered a cardiac emergency was denied emergency medical treatment. The fine for the alleged offences is \$634.

Commentators widely noted that while the arrests in Quebec City and Sherbrooke were done in the name of Bill 78, the eventual charges were for violations of municipal regulations or provincial traffic laws. The government is without doubt aware of the tenuous legality of its law. A two-front [legal challenge](#) to Bill 78 has been launched by lawyers on behalf of the student associations. They are seeking a ruling that the law is unconstitutional, which could take a year or more. More immediately, they want the Quebec court to immediately suspend the law’s applicability.

Bill 78 allows for fines of student associations that could easily bankrupt them. It assigns criminal responsibility to the associations if they fail to control the acts of their individual members.

While there were few arrests during the monster demonstration on May 22, 113 people were arrested at the evening protest that followed. Some 2,500 arrests have been made since the onset of the student strike.

Repression is Backfiring

The government is counting on a combination of threats, fines and police violence to quell and eventually discourage the student movement. But the opposite is happening – the protest movement is growing. The nightly protests in Montreal that students and supporters have been waging for 30 consecutive nights are now growing exponentially. Roger Rashi, a

longtime activist with the Quebec solidaire party, reports that the nightly march of May 24 drew several tens of thousands of participants, ten or twenty times the pre-Bill 78 nightly numbers. What's more, multiple marches are taking place concurrently.

One of the inspirations of the spreading movement is "Angry Mothers in Solidarity" (Mères en colère et solidaires). Nightly, spontaneous protests by mothers in support of the students began weeks ago in working-class districts in the center of Montreal such as Rosemont, Villeray, and Hochelaga-Maisonneuve. It began with the banging of pots and pans each evening from apartment balconies and streets, gradually emerging into street protests.

The "pots and pans" movement has now coalesced into multiple, nightly marches and is spreading like wildfire throughout the province ([video here](#)). Timing and locations each evening are coordinated via Twitter. Thousands of mothers from the movement joined the May 22 March. "I march alongside the other mothers because I am one, but this is really about future generations," Marie Christine Chabot, 45, a nurse, told the Montreal daily *The Gazette* on the May 22 march. "The more that education is accessible to everyone, the more society is likely to make the right choices. I see it in my work: People with more education smoke less, eat better, exercise more, and have less stress. We'd all be better off if people were better educated."

"It's important to show it's not just students out in the streets protesting," Marie-Claude Gagnon, a social worker and founder of Mères, told the paper. "The symbol of mothers is a good one, and it also helps protect us in the crowd," said Gagnon, whose children are aged 3, 9 and 13. "The police think twice about wading into a group of mothers and children."

A new website invites people to post personal declarations of defiance of Bill 78 by posting a photo of themselves along with their written dedication. Called "Arrest Me, Someone!" (Arretez-moi, quelqu'un!), [the site](#) has more than 5,000 declarations and the number is growing.

Protesters of all political persuasions are also taking to wearing face covering, in defiance of a Montreal municipal law rushed into adoption May 17 and a similar law threatened by the federal government that makes it illegal to wear a face covering (mask) at a protest declared "illegal."

A micro-brewery has placed its 'Grande Noirceur' beer on special sale. The name translates as 'the great darkness,' a term deeply embedded in popular culture that describes the years of rightist government in Quebec under Premier [Maurice Duplessis](#) from 1944 to 1959. The brewery says its daily production is limited to less than 50 bottles in deference to the provision of Bill 78 that requires protests of more than 50 people to seek advanced police permission.

Trade unions, opposition political parties and the Quebec Bar Association have all denounced Bill 78 and called on the government to reach a negotiated settlement with the students.

Discussion Over the Future of the Struggle

The largest student association, [CLASSE](#), is calling for defiance of Bill 78. That issue is being widely discussed among progressive social and political forces, including among members of the Québec solidaire party. The party has voiced strong support for the strike and its

members have mobilized.

During the course of May 22 protest, CLASSE did not inform the police of its route for the protest that day, as required by Law 78. The two other large student associations as well as the large trade union contingents joining with them on the march did so. Nevertheless, the vast majority of demonstrators followed the lead of CLASSE in marching on the route of their choosing for hours through the downtown core of the city, including during the afternoon rush hour. The police were powerless to act.

Some student and union leaders quietly project an eventual, electoral outcome to the struggle over tuition fees and the broader issues it has sparked. The opposition Parti québécois, which is supported by most trade union centrals, sits well in polls. The bourgeois nationalist party says it would immediately repeal Law 78 if elected.

But it's not at all clear if the government can call an election. It has problems not just with the student struggle but also with a [corruption scandal](#) weighing heavily on it. Last year, the government was obliged to convene a special commission of inquiry into the close ties between the criminal syndicates that run much of the construction industry in the province and successive Liberal Party governments.

Coincidentally, the commission began its public hearings on May 21 and these will continue into the autumn months. Testimony is expected to be especially damning to the party and the current government. A recent poll showed 80 per cent of the population believes the Liberal Party to be thoroughly corrupt.

The Parti québécois is also threatened by potential revelations before the commission. The same poll showed 65 per cent of respondents say they consider past PQ governments to be tainted by similar corruption. The party governed the province for 18 of the past 36 years.

Support for the student strike in Quebec from the rest of Canada has been building, albeit slowly. Students and unions in Ottawa are organizing a solidarity action on May 29, to include a march across the Ottawa River into the neighbouring Gatineau region of Quebec. Ottawa students have already joined several actions in Quebec, including the May 22 march. Hundreds of people attended a solidarity rally in Vancouver on May 22. In Ontario, a [student solidarity network](#) has been formed to step up support action in that province.

Trade unions in Canada have provided financial support and contingents of activists came to Montreal for May 22, including Ontario Federation of Labour president Sid Ryan. News of the student protest is spreading around the world and solidarity actions have taken place in Paris and New York City.

On the other hand, support from the NDP, the federal party to which many trade unions in English Canada are affiliated, has been all but absent. Party leader Thomas Mulcair explains his party's silence by the fact that education is a provincial responsibility. However, Bill 78 is a massive violation of the rights and freedoms supposedly guaranteed by the Canadian Constitution.

In last year's federal election, the NDP became the official opposition party for the first time in Canadian history. Nearly 60 per cent of the party's MPs represent electoral districts in Quebec. They have [apparently been muzzled](#) by the party brass.

The student protest is beginning to worry business interests in the province. A string of large

summer events and festivals, including a Grand Prix auto race next month in Montreal, draws hundreds of thousands of cash-wielding visitors each year. Already, hoteliers in Montreal say that bookings in May were down ten percent compared to last year.

In a delicious irony for striking students, a co-leader of CLASSE, Jeanne Reynolds, has won an award for academic excellence from the office of the titular head of the provincial government of Quebec, its Lieutenant Governor. Her “excellence” on the picket lines and in street protests, along with that of tens of thousands of student colleagues, is also winning awards – in the hearts and minds of growing numbers of working-class people in the province.

The Quebec government risks being swept away by a growing tide of human solidarity, with important repercussions for all of Canada. •

Roger Annis is a retired aerospace worker in Vancouver who recently spent time in Montreal reporting on the student strike. He can be reached at rogerannis@hotmail.com. A legal defense committee for students and student associations in Quebec threatened with legal action has been established and can be reached at www.fondslegal2012.org.

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