

Social Justice on Trial in Canada

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Destructive neoliberal mandates harm US and European societies. Canada's conservative government force-feeds similar policies.

They include wage and benefit cuts, less social spending, privatization of state resources, mass layoffs, deregulation, tax cuts for corporations and super-rich elites, and harsh crackdowns against resisters.

It's also about sharply hiking college tuition fees, student anger, and criminalizing public responses. More on that below.

In the 1980s, it was called Reaganomics, trickle down, and Thatcherism. In the 1990s, it was "shock therapy." Today, it's austerity. The result is unprecedented wealth transfers to corporate favorites and privileged elites.

Capital's divine rights are prioritized. Social justice is on the chopping block for elimination. Living standards are sacrificed. Ordinary people lose out. Vital services are cut. Human needs go begging. Unemployment and poverty soar. So does rage for change.

Years ago Canada lost its moorings. In December 1984, conservative prime minister, Brian Mulroney, addressed policies that began in the 1970s. Speaking before the New York Economic Club, he announced:

"Canada is open for business."

He meant US companies were welcome. Both countries cooperated for greater economic integration. Corporate interests were prioritized. Ordinary people lost out.

Oh Canada took on new meaning. Sacrificing pluralist Canadian democracy and social justice traditions became policy. Major parties formed consensus the way Democrats and Republicans do in America.

Neoliberal harshness was institutionalized. The conservative Harper government stiffened earlier policies. It serves Canada's ruling class. Finance capital is dominant. What big money

wants it gets. Corporate power overall makes policy.

Canada shifted hard right under Mulroney. Harper institutionalized it further. Last January, he addressed Davos World Economic Forum participants. He pledged “transformative” pro-business policies.

They include more tax cuts, privatizations, deregulation, and austerity hitting ordinary people hardest. “We will do more, much more,” he promised.

Socio-economic policies established represent some of much more to come. Social Canada was hardest hit. Rights for ordinary Canadians no longer matter.

Last March, Canada’s House of Commons passed budget cuts and austerity measures on top of others enacted earlier.

They included eliminating thousands of public sector jobs, cutting billions from federal programs, raising the retirement age to 67, and calling federal debt the problem to be addressed. It’s the same canard America and European countries use to justify neoliberal harshness.

Canadian social justice follows the same downward trajectory as America and across Europe. Eliminating it altogether is planned. Higher education is affected. Once it was affordable. No longer for many as tuition and fees soar.

Last winter, Quebec’s Liberal government announced tuition fee increases over the next five years of around 75% (or \$1,625). Stiff annual increases are policy. Other measures slashed vital services and benefits. Thousands of students reacted.

In mid-February, protests and strikes began. One of three provincial student associations initiated them: the Coalition large de l’association pour une solidarite syndicale etudiante (CLASSE: the Broader Coalition of the Association of Student-Union Solidarity).

Others joined in: FEUQ (the Quebec Federation of University Students) and FECQ (Quebec Federation of College Students).

Thousands swelled to 200,000 or more. Most Quebecers support them. Sharp tuition and fee increases force students and families into debt. Others drop out. Available aid is meager compared to years earlier. Higher education grows more unaffordable.

Students react by strikes and protests. They continue into their fourth month. Police confront them. Clashes and arrests follow. The usual pattern repeats against all social justice demonstrations. Legitimate struggles are criminalized.

Money power decides what's right or wrong. Ordinary people haven't a chance. In neoliberal societies like Canada, young people have most to lose. Increasingly shut out of higher education, decent jobs, and bright futures, fighting back remains their only option.

Criminalizing dissent became policy. On May 18, Quebec's Liberal government passed Bill 78. Provisions prohibit student protests or other "form(s) of gathering" within 50 meters of the "outer limits" of the "grounds" of any university or CEGEP (College of general and vocational education) building.

In Quebec, high school ends at grade 11. Completing CEGEP grades 12 and 13 are required for college or university admission. Doing it successfully earns them DEC's (diplomes d'etudes collegial).

CEGEPs also offer three-year programs in vocational studies, computer science, nursing, and other fields. With DEC credits, Bachelor's degrees can be completed in three years. Supporters and critics disagree on the system's merits or disadvantages. It's unique to Quebec.

Bill 78 also requires student associations, unions representing teachers, and CEBEP staff to "employ appropriate means to induce" compliance with enacted measures or face prosecution.

Article 9 authorizes the Minister of Education, Recreation and Sports to modify any law to ensure school sessions throughout the bill's time frame.

All demonstrations exceeding 50 people were declared illegal without provincial police approval. Offenders face daily fines. A date for education employees to return to work was established.

Winter semester classes at 11 universities and 14 CEGEPs were suspended. Completing them by August or September was mandated. The law expires July 1, 2013. It's patently illegal.

The 1982 Constitution Act established the Constitution of Canada. It contains a bill of rights called The Charter of Rights and Freedoms. It states:

"Everyone has the following fundamental freedoms:

(a) freedom of conscience and religion;

(b) freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression, including freedom of the press and other media of communication;

(c) freedom of peaceful assembly; and

(d) freedom of association.”

Article 7 assures “Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person and the right not to be deprived thereof in accordance with the principles of fundamental justice.”

Academic and speech freedoms are fundamental in free societies. So are public assembly and association rights. Without them, all others are threatened.

Howard Zinn called dissent “the highest form of patriotism.” Voltaire said, “I may disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.”

Jefferson said, “The spirit of resistance to government is so valuable on certain occasions that I wish it to be always kept alive.”

Bill 78 violates Canada’s Charter of Rights and Freedoms. So does a newly passed Montreal City Council ordinance criminalizing face paint, niqads, and other face or head coverings while demonstrating.

On May 22, it was invoked. Baton-wielding police confronted downtown Montreal protesters violently.

Tear gas was used. Dozens were arrested. Charges claimed protesters wore illegal masks and/or confronted police violently.

On May 21, confrontations occurred in Sherbrooke. It’s Quebec Premier Jean Charest’s home city. Dozens of arrests followed. Charges included demonstrating illegally.

A Final Comment

Student anger shows no signs of ebbing. Social justice rights are too important to sacrifice. Affordable education is vital. Resolution is nowhere in sight. Quebec officials are determined to force-feed austerity. They include stiff annual tuition and fee hikes.

Students are on their own. Union officials sold out to power. Who knows where this ends. Hopefully working Canadians will join them. Social justice includes more than affordable education.

Class war rages in Canada and other Western societies. Governments serve wealth and power. Eroding social justice heads faster toward total elimination. Popular interests suffer.

Ordinary people face neo-serfdom, debt peonage, and police state harshness for resisting. Fighting back is the only chance for change.

A long struggle remains. In fact, it's just begun. Staying the course is key. It's how all great victories are won. They never come easily or quickly. Hopefully Quebec students understand and won't quit. There's too much at stake.

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