

News, commentaries on the Quebec student strike

Friday 15 June 2012, by [ANNIS Roger](#), [CONWAY John F.](#), [HARPER Tim](#), [MONTGOMERY Sue](#), [SALUTIN Rick](#), [SEIDMAN Karen](#), [The Gazette](#) (Date first published: 8 June 2012).

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Contents

- [1. Six protesters slated \(...\)](#)
- [2. McGill students face \(...\)](#)
- [3. Khadir's channelling of \(...\)](#)
- [4. NDP stance on students \(...\)](#)
- [5. Quebec: Making War on \(...\)](#)
- [6. We owe a debt to Quebec's](#)

1. Six protesters slated for court today

Police appeal for information on unsolved crimes committed during demonstrations

By Sue Montgomery, *The Gazette*, June 8, 2012

Six people - including the daughter of Québec solidaire MNA Amir Khadir - may appear in court Friday after being arrested Thursday in connection with attacks on the métro and public sites during demonstrations by striking students.

Montreal police also are asking for the public's help in finding more people wanted in connection with the following crimes committed during demonstrations dating back to March:

* March 8: a man who allegedly broke a Pharmaprix window on Ste. Catherine St. W. during a demonstration.

* March 16: a man who allegedly broke the window of BCBG clothing store on Ste. Catherine.

* April 1: a man who allegedly caused damage to the hood of a car that was caught in the midst of a demonstration.

* April 12: three people - two men and a woman - who allegedly broke into the Université de Montréal then tried to get into the rector's office.

* May 14: a woman who allegedly assaulted a journalist outside the Montreal courthouse.

* May 20: a man who allegedly damaged a police car at the corner of St. Pierre and St. Antoine Sts. between noon and 12:45 p.m.

Thursday's arrests were carried out during early-morning raids on eight locations, including Khadir's home. The search warrant referred to the vandalizing April 12 of the Bourassa-Sauvé riding office of Line Beauchamp, the former education minister. A photo of Yalda Machouf Khadir, 19, appeared in the media as she was taken away in handcuffs.

At least one journalist was present during the arrest, but Montreal police spokesperson Simon Delorme said the force didn't tip anyone off about the operation. Machouf-Khadir's father said he hoped it was not a politically motivated show of force by the police on the eve of the Montreal Grand Prix.

Earlier, Premier Jean Charest, when asked whether the arrests were related to the Grand Prix, declined to comment, but he did say, "There is no reason anyone should disrupt the Grand Prix.

"In tourism, it is the biggest event in Canada. Not just for Montreal and for Quebec," he said. "And when you attack the Grand Prix, it isn't the Quebec government that is under attack. It is all Quebecers."

MNA Khadir was detained, handcuffed and fined \$494 under Quebec's Highway Safety Code because he participated in a Quebec City demonstration Tuesday declared by police to be illegal.

2. McGill students face penalties for strike role

By Karen Seidman, *The Gazette*, June 8, 2012

Even students who participated in what seemed to be fairly innocuous activities on the McGill University campus last winter, such as handing out leaflets about the student strike, may be facing disciplinary action. McGill has joined Concordia University in handing down sanctions for strike-related activities - something that is being studied by the Fédération étudiante universitaire du Québec (FEUQ).

"It seems too harsh," FEUQ president Martine Desjardins said. "It's very scary that these administrations are doing this." She said she doesn't know of any similar actions on the part of French-language universities, which had far more students participating in the protest against tuition hikes and faced far more disruptions on their campuses.

Although McGill officials said they wouldn't comment on the measures because they are considered confidential, some students say as many as 50 students have been cited for contravening the student code of conduct. And while the number is not known at Concordia either, several letters went out last week saying students who blocked others from attending class or disrupted campus activities face sanctions that could include community service, suspension or expulsion.

"Some violations were dropped, some students were admonished and some face fines of up to \$500," said McGill PhD student Fernanda Soler, who is studying education. "There are over 50 disciplinary hearings this spring."

Robin Reid-Fraser, vice president of external affairs for the Student Society of McGill University, said some students were even expelled from campus for as long as 78 hours. "There were a bunch of hearings and some were related to strike activities," Reid-Fraser said. "It could have been for being present at pickets on campus or handing out flyers."

She said some of the citations seemed arbitrary and appeared to be part of the administration's overall dismissive attitude toward striking students. There were 12,000 students at McGill on strike at the peak, although only about 300 are still considered on strike.

"It's a real concern for students that the strike wasn't acknowledged by the administration in any clear way," Reid-Fraser said. "They never said what it meant for a department to be on strike. There was just no conversation about it, although it was quite exceptional to have a student strike at McGill."

Desjardins said the FEUQ will try to do what it can to help students facing sanctions. "We're worried about what's going on at these universities," she said, adding the timing seems unfair, too, because the student executives have just changed to a new slate. "These were democratic strike votes that were taken and it seems unfair."

3. Khadir's channelling of King, Gandhi is rich indeed

Editorial, *The Gazette*, June 8, 2012

Is there something in the air? How else to explain this spirit of grandiosity, these delusions of grandeur, that seem to have seized a core group of protesting students and supporters like Quebec MNA Amir Khadir?

As protesting students are busily appropriating the symbols of the truly downtrodden and oppressed, Khadir has had the nerve to pretend that he is following in the footsteps of the murdered U.S. civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. and India's Mahatma Gandhi, who led some of the most powerful non-violent resistance movements in history. The hyperbole is being echoed on the streets, where protesting students have taken to banging pots and pans like people who faced political repression in Chile in the 1970s and economic disaster later in Argentina.

Khadir's pretensions to greatness rest on the shaky grounds of his arrest this week by police in Quebec City. He was detained when he took part in a nighttime march against tuition-fee increases and the new provincial law, Bill 78, restricting street demonstrations. Police cited him under the Quebec Highway Code for blocking a public street and issued him a \$494 fine.

For Khadir, the only elected member of the leftist party Québec solidaire, to go around wrapped in a martyr's cloak is rich. Unlike King or Gandhi, Khadir is an elected official. He is a legislator. And his duty is to uphold and obey laws that the government of which he is a part has passed. He might disagree with those laws, but he should respect the rule of law nonetheless. If he thinks duly constituted laws are optional, only to be obeyed if you agree with them, he doesn't deserve to be sitting in the National Assembly.

The co-leader of Québec solidaire, Françoise David, is also alarmingly unclear on the importance of

the rule of law. She, too, seems to think people can pick and choose which laws to obey. “Why did Quebec City police decide it was necessary to interrupt a peaceful march and give tickets, as I understand it, for violating the highway code?” she asked. “It’s completely ridiculous. They have better things to do.”

No, they don’t. Police are paid to uphold the law. If Québec solidaire doesn’t understand this, voters should help it grasp the point – by voting Khadir out in the next election.

The above editorial recalls the 5-minute interview with Amir Khadir two days ago on the noon television news program of Radio Canada, following his arrest in Quebec City. Like the many other hostile journalists he faced that day, the program host was aghast that an elected member of the National Assembly would counsel opposition and even civil disobedience of a bad law. ‘It’s your duty to uphold the law of the land,’ she admonished Khadir.

He proceeded to give several examples of elected officials in other countries who have taken principled stands against bad or immoral laws and been arrested in consequence. He began with an example from Russia. The host nearly swallowed her microphone. “You are comparing Quebec to Russia?” she gasped. Khadir replied, “Ok, how about an example from the United States? Would that suit you better?” He then proceeded to give the example of four members of the U.S. Congress who, along with actor George Clooney and others, were arrested in March of this year for protesting alleged human rights abuses in Sudan. The host quickly wrapped up the interview.-RA

4. NDP stance on students a display of maturity

By Tim Harper (columnist), *Toronto Star*, June 8, 2012

OTTAWA— Sometimes a political caucus can show maturity by showing restraint. So it appears with the official Opposition in Ottawa, an NDP caucus dotted with rookies, students and accidental MPs drawn from a demographic that sparked post-election jokes about the daycare centre in the Commons.

The caricature, of course, was overdrawn, but the mass of unfamiliar faces sitting across from the Conservatives was a large unknown.

That a good number of their Quebec MPs — 58 of their 101 member caucus was elected in that province — would find the siren song of solidarity with striking students irresistible seemed to be a given. That they, largely, have stayed away from the turmoil on their streets displays a discipline that is required for any party styling itself as a government-in-waiting. It also threatens to alienate a traditional constituency in the province that looks to the potential push their movement would receive if the Orange Wave joined them on nightly marches and spoke out forcefully in their favour.

Their supporters and staffers are marching, but the MPs have largely remained apart.

“Some of them are taking flack from supporters for not joining,” said one party insider. And some in the caucus are silently chafing at the leash, feeling that those are “their people” on the street.

Tom Mulcair, who as a provincial minister had a very public falling out with Premier Jean Charest, did not lay down the law at caucus, but there was a discussion at the outset of the student strike.

That was followed by a more specific discussion at a Quebec caucus meeting under the leadership of Trois-Rivières MP Robert Aubin. The caucus was told that education was a matter of provincial jurisdiction and there was no federal role to play.

Not everyone has stayed away. Alexandre Boulerice, the highprofile MP from Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie has joined the marchers, as has 23-year-old Ève Péclet, the MP from La Pointe-de-l'Île. Boulerice also blogged his opposition to Bill 78, the Charest law that broadened police powers and sought to limit the right of protesters to take to the streets.

Sherbrooke MP Pierre-Luc Dusseault, 21, told his hometown newspaper that a year ago, as a student, he would have been on strike. Instead he was elected to Parliament. “We are seeing young people standing up for themselves. It’s an important moment in our history,” he said.

But if there is a tightrope walker in the caucus, Boulerice has become the Wallenda of the NDP. He told me Thursday that he is proud of the people mobilizing in his riding, and the nightly marches and pot banging are good for democracy. “But this is not the battle of a federal NDP MP,” he says, and those trying to pull him into a more public position understand that.

The only official NDP position on the matter is a call for an \$800 million increase in federal transfers to the provinces for post-secondary education.

The perils for the caucus of diving into the Quebec street protests would have been obvious. The party would have been tarred by their opponents for aligning themselves with protests that now include smoke bombs in the Métro, vandalism of ministers’ offices, and threats to disrupt the Montreal Formula One Grand Prix this weekend and deprive the city of tourism revenue during festival season.

Pictures of an arrest of an NDP MP — see this week’s arrest of Québec Solidaire MNA Amir Khadir — would have raised questions outside Quebec about the maturity of an Opposition caucus.

The downside, of course, is that there will be voters in Quebec who will feel the party has lost its way, that the exuberance personified by the late Jack Layton has been neutered in the pursuit of power.

If much of what is driving people to the streets in Montreal is Occupy-style disgust with income inequality, the party has lost a chance to address what should be a signature issue. On balance, though, the restraint has to be seen as a win for a caucus that has held the line. It is a necessary step for a party that is, in Mulcair’s words, trying to get the centre in Canadian politics, to move to them.

5. Quebec: Making War on Our Children

By John F. Conway

The following is a forthcoming column in ‘Planet S’, published weekly in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.

On ne lâche pas” (‘We’re not backing down’)-slogan of the student mobilization

A society at war with its children is a society in deep crisis. Quebec's student strike mobilization has set world records for duration and size. The organizational ability of the students has been remarkable, and escalating levels of disciplined popular support nothing short of astonishing. Tens of thousands are mobilized day after day, week after week and now month after month, and student support for the boycott of classes grows and becomes more solid. The propaganda efforts of the Quebec government and the establishment media to smear the students as entitled, self-seeking brats, whining about modest tuition increases and seeking mayhem for its own sake have failed on two fronts. The students have responded with their own, well-organized information system which has found its way into the world press, and is transmitted instantaneously by cell phone and iPhone to hundreds of thousands. Those who follow the social media are better informed than those relying on the dailies and the big TV networks. The students simply dismiss the established media with the contempt it has earned. The smear campaign has also failed to turn Quebec society massively against the students. On the contrary, their popular support keeps building with growing numbers of sympathizers joining the students in the streets, often joyously banging pots and pans.

Nevertheless the events we are witnessing should disturb us all. The spectacle of gangs of riot police clad in ominous black dispersing clouds of tear gas and pepper spray, wading into crowds swinging truncheons, boot stomping the hapless victims they manage to seize, firing rubber bullets and throwing percussion grenades, and dragging dozens off to jail are images long associated with police state repression. And it is being done to our children on the streets of our cities. So far the physical casualties have not been deeply tragic: split scalps, minor concussions, bruises and contusions, a few broken bones, a lost eye, and relatively minor property damage. But that could change in an instant as Quebec Premier Jean Charest continues to roll out the police state to the applause of far too many Canadians, and to the cheers of much of the established media. All it takes is one trigger happy cop, or one over-zealous truncheon blow, encouraged by the calls for repression and the chorus of denunciation directed against the students.

Charest's political motives behind his handling of the student uprising were clear from the outset. When the expected student mobilization against the tuition hike - 82 per cent staged in over 7 years - began in February 2012, Charest made it clear he would not relent. He had been criticized as weak and soft on previous occasions for backing off tuition increases when confronted by student protest. In 2012 Charest was already a defeated premier. The consensus was, and the polls confirmed, he faced certain defeat in the next election. The recent revelations about deep corruption in the relationships between the government, the construction industry, and organized crime only made that defeat more certain and probably more catastrophic. By refocusing public attention on getting tough with students and imposing law and order on "mob rule," Charest's panic and desperation became clear. He was gambling on riding the defeat of the students to victory, or at least a less humiliating defeat.

Charest miscalculated badly. He believed a refusal to negotiate, and a tough, no compromise stance, would finally break the back of the student mobilization, especially as final exams loomed and students faced the loss of academic credit. The opposite happened. Charest's hard line resulted in an even more massive mobilization galvanizing even more student support, leading to huge demonstrations day after day. Charest panicked and opted for naked state repression to crush the students.

Bill 78 was rammed through the Quebec National Assembly on 18 May 2012. Officially titled "An Act to enable students to receive instruction from the postsecondary institutions they attend," the law would be better identified as "The Temporary Quebec Police State Act." The police are now the arbiters of, and gatekeepers to, the practice of democracy in Quebec. Any gathering of 50 or more must give police notice including the itinerary, duration and time. Police can refuse permission, or order changes in the plan. Demonstrations and picket lines are forbidden within 50 meters of the

boundaries of post-secondary institutions. Teachers, leaders of student and teacher union organizations are required to “induce” students to obey the law or face prosecution. The fines imposed for violations are nothing short of legalized financial terrorism: \$1000 to 5000 for individuals; \$7000 to 35,000 for student leaders; \$25,000 to 125,000 for unions and student organizations – to be doubled for the second and any subsequent offence.

The law flagrantly and knowingly violates numerous provisions of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The law expires 1 July 2013 before any constitutional challenges can wend their weary way through the courts, but it will have served its political purpose of crushing the student mobilization. Besides this use of legal and financial terror to repress the movement, the anti-terrorist squad has been ordered by the Minister of Public Safety to interview student leaders, a clear act of heavy-handed intimidation. Montreal’s City Council joined the parade of repression by banning the wearing of masks during demonstrations (thus depriving protesters the protection of choice against tear gas and pepper spray). Not since the notorious section 98 amendment to the Criminal Code in the aftermath of the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike has such a brutally repressive and flagrantly anti-democratic law been adopted in Canada.

The repression has so far failed to break the students. Indeed, the mobilization has grown stronger and more determined, convinced that Charest’s behaviour was an act of desperate, heavy-handedness and a final admission of political failure. Huge demonstrations in Montreal, and many smaller ones throughout the province, continue in open defiance of the law, with the students now joined by large numbers opposed to the law and its attack on democracy. On 22 May over 100,000 (students claim a lot more) marched in Montreal in defiance of the law, and on 28 May hundreds of robed lawyers marched in solidarity with the students. Over 500 lawyers have offered their pro bono services to carry on the battle in the courts. Hundreds have been arrested. The mobilization, the repression, and the arrests continue, now including leader of Québec Solidaire and Member of the Quebec National Assembly Amir Khadir. He was arrested on June 6 in Quebec City. The next day his Montreal home was raided and Khadir’s daughter and partner, both prominent student leaders, were arrested. They were among 11 student leaders arrested in during dawn police raids in Montreal.

Canada’s media have behaved shamefully throughout, acting as servile cheerleaders of Charest’s repression and carrying out a negative propaganda offensive against the students. Citizens had to go abroad to get balanced, informative analysis. The Guardian in the UK and Al Jazeera English provided better reportage and analysis than The Globe and Mail. The best coverage was provided by Concordia Student TV and the student press in general. It was only on 2 June 2012 that The Globe and Mail woke up, announcing on its front page, “It’s Not About Tuition Any More,” providing two full pages of analysis and background.

It was never only about tuition. It was about what is happening here and abroad as the austerity measures imposed by neoliberalism wreck the lives of growing numbers of people, especially the younger generation. It is about what the neoliberals contemptuously call “entitlements” to education, health care, jobs, economic security, a reasonable life, “entitlements” that must be taken away or cut severely. Quebec students and others fighting back against the neoliberal juggernaut are answering clearly. These are not “entitlements,” rather they are “the rights of citizenship” in any free and democratic society. We intend to take them back and to extend them in an effort to build a humane and civilized society.

Neoliberalism’s answer in Quebec, and around the world, is the same as the answer of capitalism whenever it has been threatened by democracy and popular mobilizations in the past: repression and naked force. The question we face is nothing less than “who rules, who has the power?” And by the way, whatever became of democracy?

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6. We owe a debt to Quebec's student strikers

Rick Salutin (Friday columnist), *Toronto Star*, June 8, 2012

In the following column, Rick Salutin laments the decline if not disappearance of strike action in Canada and salutes the students in Quebec for reviving it. I acknowledge the space and editorial limits of a column in the Toronto Star, but it would be helpful to explain who in Canada has allowed the strike weapon to, in his words, be "sent to the Museum of Civilization." Note Salutin's dubious claim that Canada has historically expressed "evenhandedness" in the Middle East and a commitment to "peacekeeping" (whatever that is).-RA

Speaking of debts, as most governments now do in order to explain why they can't create anything and need to cut back on whatever is already there, here's what I think we owe to those striking Quebec students.

We owe them for taking a shot at saving our national honour in the eyes of the world. We've lost brownie points on the environment, our even-handedness in areas like the Mideast, our commitment to peacekeeping — but their campaign for equal, publicly funded access to higher education hits a note closer to that other, previous Canada. I should add I don't begrudge the Harper government its shifts; it's what they said they'd do. But they don't reflect the attitudes still held by more than 60 per cent of the population — at least according to how they vote.

We owe them for striking a blow on behalf of public discourse. I'm thinking here of the term entitlements, which has replaced rights in the discussion. When did health, housing, a dignified retirement, etc., stop being human rights and turn into shabby, whiny entitlements? It didn't just happen. There's a linguistic war on, and it isn't French versus English; it's over politically loaded terms.

The students have fought this one on the issue of free — in the sense of publicly funded — post-secondary education. If post-secondary seems a bridge too far, think about this: any argument you can make against accessible post-secondary schooling, would apply in exactly the same way to high schools and elementary. In fact, during the last Depression, when high school still wasn't widely available, there were the same arguments you hear now about how we couldn't afford it. It was then, in that economic mess, that the fight was fought. I'm not talking about Quebec; it happened here in Ontario. The students aren't just out to save a few bucks personally; they're fighting for a historic principle.

OK, now having opened the door, as they say in the courtroom shows, I suppose I have to address the cry: There isn't enough money! Along with its twin: The numbers don't lie. Actually, since numbers are animated by people, they do anything people do: they lie, obscure, omit — so let me just point this out: When something is a widely agreed social priority, the numbers obediently adjust. The money gets found. That happens in every war and natural disaster. In those cases nobody ever says there's no money. They raise taxes, rejig priorities, rearrange financial schedules. Suddenly it's no prob. In other words, this isn't just about economics, it's about politics. There's clearly more to be said on this but that's true with all serious issues.

Here are some more things we're indebted to those students for:

A good democratic moment. It happened when the Charest government offered a weak compromise. The student leaders didn't say yes or no. They sent it to their members, who voted it down. This is the opposite of what happened in the Greek crisis. The prime minister said his people should get to vote on the harsh terms of a bailout; the international bankers vetoed that and sacked him.

A good old-tyme strike. This may be your last chance to see one before they're all sent to the Museum of Civilization — the way the Harper people are banning them long before they ever start. As in any good strike (and yes, there are bad ones), the outcome hangs on the public's reaction. We're seeing a fresh start for the public imagination. Do you ever tire of hearing about everything that's now impossible and how we need to get real? It's only in the last few decades that governments became bodies exclusively devoted to eliminating whatever was once built by and for everyone — like public education. Those days lie within historical memory — at a time when our society was less wealthy and its people less educated. They're also sometimes just a plane ride away, like Finland, where schooling is free right through university — and it's a lot like Canada, except without our natural resources! It isn't undoable, it's merely become unthinkable, except for those neat students in the streets of Quebec.

They are our Indignados and we owe them.

P.S.

* <http://www.rogerannis.com/news-commentaries-on-the-quebec-student-strike/>