

PQ government in Quebec does an about face on the right to protest

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Montreal — During last year's student strike in Quebec, including during the election it provoked in August/September, the Parti québécois and its leader, now Quebec premier, Pauline Marois criticized the infamous Bill 78/Law 12 that obliged students and any other protesters to seek police permission to hold public demonstrations. Upon its election on September 4, her government abolished Law 12.

Now the PQ faces a new right to protest scandal, but this time it has switched sides and is on the "you don't have the right to protest" side. The scandal involves petty municipal regulations that have come to be used by police in place of Law 12 to shut down protests. In Montreal, the regulation is "P-6." It is quickly becoming as nasty a symbol of capitalist repression as were the "Bill 78" and "Law 12" symbols of the preceding Liberal government of Premier Jean Charest.

Police in Montreal and also in Quebec City are using the municipal regulations to close down ongoing student protests against post-secondary tuition fee hikes as well as protests against, get this, police violence and brutality. Police have conducted mass arrests in recent weeks, including using the "kettling" method that an inquiry into police conduct at the G-20 leaders' meeting in Toronto in 2010 declared to be illegal. (Toronto police were eventually forced to declare they will never again use the method.)

As many as 200 people were arrested by Montreal police at a protest on March 22 to mark the one-year anniversary of the student strike. Earlier, more than 250 were arrested on March 15 at the 17th annual march in the city against police brutality. The police preventively closed down the march with arrests before it began and they also confiscated banners displaying the political themes of the march.

People arrested under P-6 are levied fines of \$647. The regulation is facing a legal challenge. One of its provisions prohibits the wearing of masks at an event declared "illegal" by police.

The Montreal Gazette of March 26 reports Pauline Marois' declaration on P-6. "We abolished this scandalous law [Law 12] which made no sense," she told reporters. "I agree that people should be able to demonstrate..."

"The rule is simple. You don't have to give your itinerary 24 hours in advance. You can give it once you gather and the police ask for it," she added. "It is for their own security and for the security of the people in the streets." (Law 12 obliged protesters to provide at least eight hours of advance request to police. There is no such advance notice indicated in P-6, which Marois and its other supporters say is a sign of a better law.)

But that's not how the police agency that the premier is backing sees matters. A spokesperson for the Montreal Police, Sergeant Jean-Bruno Latour, declared to the Montreal daily La Presse last week, "The [Canadian] Charter [of rights and freedoms] protects the right to freedom of expression, but there is no right to protest."

And of course, last year's civil rights protests never accepted the argument by then-Premier Jean Charest, now peddled by Marois, that no one need fear ceding to police the power to decide who may and who may not stage political protests.

This renewed conflict over civil rights is going to cost the PQ and its government dearly. Last year's police repression stirred a torrent of protest, (see a news compilation [here](#)) including from large sections of the membership and electoral base of the party. While protests against the renewed police repression this year have so far been much smaller (affected by the intended intimidation factor and by the absence of mass student protests that constituted de facto acts of mass, civil disobedience), it is only a matter of time before larger actions occur.

One indication of the tensions that are brewing and the commitment to civil rights values of most quebecois was a 12-hour vigil held in front of the constituency office of Pauline Marois on March 19 (before the premier and her cabinet colleagues declared their support to P-6). Forty one organizations—student, trade union, civil rights and many others—backed the vigil. Participants called on Marois to speak out against police violence and illegality and to convene a public inquiry into the violence unleashed last year by police against the student movement. (You can watch a four-minute video of the vigil, in French, [here](#).)

Vigil participants burned a copy of the Montreal police code of conduct, sending a message that the police routinely violate the nice-sounding phrases that are penned inside it.

Two days following the vigil, the Quebec daily *Le Devoir* published a front-page retrospective on the 2012 student strike. It featured a photo of Maxence Valade, the student who lost an eye when police viciously attacked a protest in Victoriaville, Quebec on May 4 in front of a convention center where the then-governing Liberal Party was holding its annual meeting. Many protesters were battered by police batons, fists, boots and rubber bullets; several others in addition to Valade were very seriously injured.

A particularly nasty editorial on the latest uproar appeared in *The Gazette* on March 27. It mocked the PQ for having criticized Bill 78 and Law 12 in 2012 and now supporting P-6 in 2013. All the restrictions are good and are needed to prevent "mob rule" in the streets of Montreal, write the editors.

All this takes place as many students at post-secondary institutions in Quebec continue to organize against tuition fee hikes. The PQ government has decreed a three per cent, annual increase for the foreseeable future, violating its vague, electoral commitment last year to heed the demand of the student movement for a freeze and to provide a forum for serious discussion of instituting free, post-secondary schooling.

A candlelight vigil to condemn the use and abuse of P-6 has been announced for the evening of March 29 in downtown Montreal. In a sign of the popular humour that always marked the civil rights struggle of 2012, a resident of Quebec City who will not be attending the vigil has nonetheless sent an itinerary for the vigil by e-mail to the Montreal police.

Sébastien Lambert told *Le Devoir* that he has noticed criticism leveled against protesters for not supplying itineraries to police. "So now there's an itinerary; if people want to follow it, they can, and the police have it their hands. The itinerary has been provided, we'll see what happens."

Last year, a group of student protesters who were termed "The Rabbits" for their practice of wearing rabbit masks at protests would sometimes attempt to hand copies of the free Montreal street newspaper "*L'Itinéraire*" (The Itinerant) to police officers on hand at marches threatened with

the provisions of Law 12.

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<http://rabble.ca/blogs/bloggers/roger-annis/2013/03/pq-government-quebec-does-about-face-right-protest>