

Quebec government steps up police repression as student movement seeks to broaden struggle

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The opening salvo in a promised, summer of protest by Quebec's student movement was delivered at the annual, Montreal Grand Prix auto race and surrounding festivities from June 7 to 10. Hundreds, sometimes thousands, of students and their allies used the high-profile event to press demands for a freeze in post-secondary tuition fees and an end to police and state repression.

The government of Premier Jean Charest answered with an unprecedented police mobilization that one Montreal Gazette reporter called "staggering." Thousands of police were omnipresent in the Montreal's subway system and at major intersections throughout the four days. They arrested or detained scores of protesters, particularly those wearing the symbol of the student movement-red cloth squares pinned to clothing.

The short subway line connecting downtown Montreal to two island parks in the middle of the St. Lawrence River where the race was run carried two police officers on every subway car on race day, June 10, and the preceding day. Entrance to the parks was by police permission only, with officers declaring that the public space was a "private park" for the duration of the race weekend. Those who challenged that call, especially if they were being turned away, risked being roughed up or arrested for their troubles.

The tensest moments of the weekend occurred on the Saturday evening. Several thousand pro-student demonstrators brought their message and their noisemakers to the center of the city and mixed in with tens of thousands of Grand Prix revelers. Tense standoffs with police went on until well after midnight. According to Radio Canada, there were 27 people arrested, of whom 16 face criminal charges.

Numerous witnesses told the broadcaster of police violence they witnessed.

Earlier on Saturday, several hundred women's right supporters mobilized to express anger at the decadence they say the Formula One race symbolizes. They staged a march against the trade in women's' bodies that accompanies the event each year.

They tried to take their case to the Sheraton Montreal Hotel, which they say is the preferred hotel

for what they call the “international jerk-offs” that purchase sex during the weekend. The march was blocked and broken up by Montreal police

The image of the race took a dive at the outset when former F1 driver and hometown hero Jacques Villeneuve publicly thumbed his nose at striking students, calling them spoiled because tuition fees in Quebec happen to be lower than in other provinces in Canada and some countries in Europe. Perhaps not coincidentally, the race failed to sell all the spectator seats for the first time in its 35 year history.

Post-secondary students in Quebec began a massive strike in February against a proposed 75 percent increase in tuition fees. The strike is on hold since May 18. That’s when the Quebec government adopted the draconian Law 78 which suspends the school year at strike-bound institutions until mid-August and seeks to cripple protests and the student associations organizing them.

Unprecedented targeting by police

Police have come under intense fire for their now-routine practice of profiling for detention or arrest those wearing the red square. News websites are full of testimonials of people, mostly young, telling stories of harassment or assault by police while wearing the square. Some 40 people wearing it were detained on June 10 while entering the park from the subway at the Grand Prix site.

To test the hypothesis, the French-language daily *Le Devoir* sent two reporters on assignment on June 9 wearing red squares and backpacks. Sure enough, they were frequently stopped and searched. At the park/race site, they were illegally detained by police for 20 minutes.

When the undercover journalists asked one officer why they were detained, he replied, “Because you’re wearing a revolutionary symbol and I’m fed up with people like you.” They wrote that others they observed or interviewed wearing backpacks but without the red square were not searched or detained. They titled their article, “Red square? Papers, please.”

The most prominent of the preventive arrests that have taken place was that of 19 year old Yalda Machouf-Khadir and four other students on June 7. She was arrested during a police raid on her family home at 6 am and spent five nights in prison before being released on bail. She and the others faces charges of mischief and property damage stemming from several protests in April. Her lawyers say detention for such charges is unheard of.

She is the daughter of Amir Khadir, the leader and sole elected member in Quebec’s National Assembly of the left wing Quebec solidaire party. He was himself arrested and detained while participating in a peaceful, pro-student protest two days earlier in Quebec City [\[1\]](#).

Inspiration, if not direction, for the police targeting of opponents of the tuition hike and Bill 78 is coming right from the top. Quebec Premier Jean Charest declared last month that student protests were damaging the economy of the province and should cease. He told journalist on June 14, “What I have seen in the last six months as Premier of Quebec is something I’m worried about. There’s new tolerance for violence, intimidation, civil disobedience.”

His minister of culture, Christine St-Pierre, stated on June 8, “...we know what it means, the red square. It means intimidation, violence and preventing students from studying (referring to student picket lines that shut down education institutions during the three-month strike). That’s what it means to us and to the big, big majority of Quebecois.” (2,800 people in Quebec’s vibrant arts and

culture scene have signed an open letter denouncing the minister's remarks.)

Montreal's English language daily, The Gazette, editorialized on June 12 in favor of police actions. "... the student protests have engendered vandalism, and thus it is not unreasonable for the police to assume that anyone wearing a red square could be a potential troublemaker.

"It appears the student protests have been infiltrated by violent radical elements, piggybacking on the student movement to indulge their penchant for anarchic vandalism. While student leaders have dissociated their cause from such actions, they have been reluctant to forcefully denounce them. Thus...the student movement must bear some responsibility for it."

Bill 78 challenged

The infamous Law 78 requires advance police approval for any act of political or social expression involving 50 or more people. It imposes severe fines on participating individuals and organizations for actions declared "illegal" by police. It prescribes penalties against the organizers of protest events for the actions by individuals deemed illegal.

The law aims to weaken if not destroy student associations through financial penalties for violations of its provisions, including denial of membership dues check-off and denial of access to on-campus facilities.

A court challenge to Law 78 on behalf of 70 organizations opened on June 12. The challengers include all four of Quebec's post-secondary student associations, several of Quebec's largest trade union centrals, and community and environmental organizations. They are seeking an immediate suspension of the application of the law and a ruling that it is unconstitutional.

Lawyers for the student-led challenge say the law is crafted in part to hobble student and other protests during an election that the government must call sometime between now and the end of 2013.

By all appearance, the government recognizes the dubious legality of Law 78. Police have not laid any charges under it. Instead, they have used municipal or highway traffic regulations in the hundreds of arrests they have conducted since the adoption of the law. But they are using it to declare every student or Law 78-related protest "illegal," possibly setting the stage for post-facto charges.

More than 3,000 people have been arrested since the beginning of the student strike.

At a recent convention of FECQ, one of the associations of junior college students, newly elected leader Éliane Laberge declared, "It's clear that we do not want to see a Quebec where elected members of the National Assembly are arrested, where young people are arrested in their homes, and where students spend days in prison."

"Neither do we want a Quebec where the government dismisses with a wave of its hand the heartfelt wishes of an entire generation..."

Students maintaining mobilization footing and unity

The FECQ met in convention on the weekend of the Grand Prix. It called on the government to

accept a mediated end to the tuition fee conflict, but also decided on a plan of action throughout the summer that will see it remain on a mobilization footing along with a larger counterpart, the CLASSE coalition.

FECQ is joining CLASSE's call for another mass march in Montreal, on June 22. The largest student marches have been taking place for months now on the 22nd of each month, including the May 22 march that drew an estimated 400,000 people, the largest single protest action in Canadian history.

FECQ will hold rallies across Quebec in smaller centers leading up to June 22 and will host a rally in Quebec City on the same day. This decision continues the solid unity that student associations have been able to maintain in the face of government and media efforts to divide them, particularly in targeting CLASSE as an instigator of violent and criminal acts.

FECQ also says it will turn more attention and resources towards unseating the Liberal Party in the next provincial election.

Election call up government's sleeve

With the likely failure of Law 78 and police repression to end the student mobilizations—in fact, they are provoking a broader mobilization against the government's capitalist agenda—the last hope to salvage the government program may be a timely election call. There, the power of money and media as well as the weakening and compartmentalization of citizen action in which bourgeois elections excel would work to the benefit of the Liberals and their elite backers.

They are likely to stress a 'law and order' theme against the 'chaos' supposedly engendered by the student protest.

Unfortunately for the government, it faces three major obstacles to that course. One is the student mobilization itself, which refuses to bow to repression or calls to reason. Government candidates will be dogged by protests in any election campaign.

Two is the formal commission of inquiry that the Charest government has been obliged to convene into corruption in Quebec's construction industry and its cozy relationship to successive Quebec governments. The commission's public hearings began in early June and will continue throughout the rest of the year. They will be a continual reminder of the moral rot and economic privilege of the government and ruling elite of the province.

The third obstacle is the government's apparently weakening electoral position. The spontaneous rise in the past few months of the 'pots and pans,' community mobilizations against Bill 78 is one sign of this. Another sign is the electoral setback the government suffered in mid term elections in two electoral districts in the Montreal region on June 11.

Support for the governing party dropped sharply in the districts of LaFontaine and Argenteuil—from 70 percent to 53 percent in the former and 50 percent to 34 percent in the latter. While it retained its seat in LaFontaine, it lost Argenteuil to the Parti québécois (PQ), the pro-sovereignty official opposition party. The Liberals had held Argenteuil for the past 47 years.

Discussion over strategy

A discussion over the future course of the social struggle in Quebec took place at a session of a day-

long political conference hosted by the Quebec media ngo Alternatives on June 9. It was attended by several hundred activists. There, co-leader of CLASSE, Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois, made a forceful argument in favor of the group's proposal for a "social strike" against the government by the entire working class movement, including its trade union component. [2]

Nadeau-Dubois explained that the student movement has reached the limit of the pressure it can exert on the government. Something like 75 percent of the students in the province have been on strike at one moment or another. There have been 115 consecutive days of mobilization. Some businesses, notably tourism, are suffering economic losses from the strike. The cost to the government of suppressing the student movement has probably now exceeded the cost of the tuition freeze it refuses to concede.

Still, he said, the government is holding firm. "What, then, is missing from our mobilizations?" he asked.

"The (student) strike and the movement of the 'pots and pans' has been very positive, but it's becoming clearer that these are not sufficient. Already, the pots and pans protests that were in their thousands last week are down to the hundreds this week in the streets of Montreal."

"So, we must think of new steps."

Some hold out the possibility that an election will eventually resolve the crisis. Yes, Nadeau-Dubois agreed, the Liberals must eventually be defeated at the polls. But, "The timidity of the (Parti québécois) over the tuition hike prevents us from placing all of our hopes on the ballot box, certainly in the short term."

(The PQ is broadly supported by leadership circles in the trade union movement. During the 18 years of the last 35 that it governed the province, it applied variants of the same pro-capitalist policies as the Liberals. In the current struggle, it has refused to commit to a freeze in post-secondary tuition fees, the issue that lies at the origin of the conflict between the student movement and the government.)

"The community movement is important to the present struggle, but it's not through a community movement that a significant increase in pressure can be mounted against the government."

"So all attention is turning to the union movement," he said. Efforts must be redoubled to prepare a social strike against the government. A common front with the unions is needed, he said, which until now have been reacting "timidly" to the student strike.

A common front should not be centered on the issues in the student strike alone. It should be focused on a broad range of social issues—education, health care, privatization of government enterprises. This would appeal to the majority of the population and it would also counter the false impression that the student and the trade union organizations are only interested in their narrow, respective interests.

Nadeau-Dubois' talk was later followed by Louis Roy, president of one of the largest union centrals in Quebec, the CSN. His lengthy presentation consisted largely of arguments that members of the union centrals are not ready to enter onto the path of a social strike. He did not explain if and how that could change.

Roy made important references to the need for a united fight against not just the policies of the Quebec government but also the federal government.

Electoral alliances?

With an eventual election call by the Liberals in the wings, there are mounting pressures on Quebec solidaire, the only party to have stood squarely with the student movement, to join an electoral alliance with the Parti québécois where it would play a subordinate role. QS made only modest gains in the June 11 by-elections, albeit in districts where its political base is small.

Leaders of the SPQ Libre group, a trade union-based group in the PQ that was expelled from the party in 2010, say QS should present at most two candidates and leave the rest of the field open to candidates of the PQ.

Party leader Amir Khadir answered all this in a June 5 open letter (in French), affirming that the party is unconvinced it should abandon its independent role. Responding to the argument that voter abstention is rising and will facilitate the Liberals remaining in power, he wrote, *"To fight against abstentionism, it's necessary to clearly align political perspectives with the social mobilization. This is what Quebec solidaire has sought to do since its foundation."*

"The PQ, a governing party won over to neo-liberalism, views the social movements as problems to manage or points of political debate. Quebec solidaire, on the contrary, wants to see the social movements win because together with them, the interests of our people advance and Quebec therefore wins." [3]

Khadir and party co-leader Françoise David elaborated these points in a lengthy commentary published in *Le Devoir* on June 14. [4]

To this important debate in Quebec can be added the need for discussion in the trade union and social movements right across Canada on how to broaden the struggle in Quebec.

Presently, the federal government is pushing a mega-budget bill through the federal Parliament containing unprecedented cuts to social services, environmental protection and democratic rights. It projects big boosts to military spending and more subsidies to private industry. In other words, the governments of Canada and Quebec are pursuing near-to identical policies.

New Democratic Party members of Parliament have been silent on the stakes in the struggle in Quebec and opposition to the federal budget has been very modest across the working class movement [5]. A broad and united mobilization is needed, inspired by the example of the Quebec students, for an alternative government and societal direction.

Roger Annis, June 14, 2012

P.S.

* The following article was first published in two parts on Rabble.ca.

<http://www.rogerannis.com/quebec-government-steps-up-police-repression-as-student-movement-seeks-to-broaden-struggle/>

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Footnotes

[1] See on ESSF (article 25458), [Québec: Montreal police raid home of MNA Amir Khadir, arrest his daughter](#).

[2] The session, which took place in French, can be viewed here: <http://cutvmontreal.ca/broadcasts/2012/6/9/1439>.

[3] See on ESSF (article 25560), [Lettre à mon ami Pierre Curzi sur la question des alliances électorales](#).

[4] See on ESSF (article 25562), [La réplique des casseroles aux urnes - Le désir profond d'un Québec progressiste](#). Furthermore, in a speech marking the end of the current session of the Quebec National Assembly on June 15, Amir Khadir said free and accessible post-secondary education in Quebec is an entirely desirable and realistic societal objective.

[5] <http://www.thestar.com/news/canada/politics/article/1208502--chantal-hebert-jury-is-still-out-of-thomas-mulcair-s-makeover-of-the-ndp>