

EDUCATION IS A RIGHT, NOT A COMMODITY

by Kevin Regnault

On Tuesday, May 22, approximately 350,000 protesters marched in Montréal, Québec, in defiance of Bill 78, a new provincial law which renders such protests illegal.



Approx. 350,000 march in Montréal on May 22, 2012. Photo credit: unknown.

Many called this the largest act of civil disobedience in Canada's history. Four days later, the record was shattered when around 500,000 Québécois from all walks of life took to the streets. Students have been on strike since February 13, boycotting classes and participating in regular protests.

It began when the provincial cabinet declared its intent to raise tuition fees by 75% over 5 years, to a total of \$3,793 CAD per year (approx. €2,950). Tuition in Québec is subsidized by the provincial government, with Canadian students paying more than their Québécois counterparts, and international students paying full price.

Even after the tuition increase, Québécois will still pay the lowest tuition in Canada. However, students say that the strike is not about numbers, but priorities. Even as the government seeks to cut around \$230 million from education, it has handed out over \$900

million in tax cuts to the wealthy and to corporations. In addition, the government has introduced the “Plan Nord” to develop the resources in the frozen North of Québec, which involves generous financial incentives to resource corporations.

Students claim that education is a right, not a commodity, and that it is the government’s responsibility to freeze tuition at current levels, or even reduce it. Premier Jean Charest insists that he merely wants to bring tuition more in line with fees paid in other provinces across Canada.

There are now over 150,000 students on indefinite strike across Québec, represented by dozens of student associations. While some pundits have attempted to label the strikes as undemocratic or as infringing upon the rights of dissenting students, most student associations are ruled by direct democracy, and many of them even participate in weekly “reaffirmation votes” where students confirm their dedication to the strike, and raise possible strategies to employ or problems to address.

Students have participated in regular marches since the beginning of the strike, often with hundreds of thousands of participants. There have also been some brief occupations of university and government offices. Although demonstrations have been predominantly peaceful, and student organizations have actively condemned violence, there have been multiple incidents.

In February and March, there were reports of strikers physically preventing students from attending classes in Montréal. Unlike a worker strike, students are still allowed to attend class if they wish. These blockades were condemned by both student leaders and government officials, and there have not been any repeats.

On May 10, Montréal Metro subway stations were shut down for approximately 90 minutes during rush hour, after students detonated smoke bombs in the stations. The four students turned themselves in to police shortly thereafter, and have been charged with mischief, conspiracy, and committing a terrorist hoax.

Molotov cocktails were thrown at government buildings in April, although no fires were started and nobody was hurt. Cocktails were also thrown at police on May 18 and 19, in anger about the passing of a new law, Loi Spéciale 78, on May 18.

Loi 78 has been denounced by legal experts across the country as draconian and unconstitutional. The Barreau du Québec has publicly opposed the legislation, and over 500 lawyers have volunteered their services to student associations seeking to overturn the law in court.

Loi 78 requires that all protests involving more than 50 people submit a planned route and other information to police for approval with at least 8 hours' notice. The police have completely authority to change or deny any protest plans. The legislation also includes harsh penalties of up to \$125,000 for both individuals and organizations involved in blocking access to classes, protesting near a school, or even encouraging or supporting an illegal protest.

Critics say that the wording of the law is too vague, and that it illegally suspends the fundamental rights of a targeted group of people. The legislation is set to expire on July 1, 2013, if it is not overturned in court before that date. Student groups have also asked a judge to suspend parts of the law pending a court decision.

Although pundits claim that public opinion is against the students, since the passing of Loi 78 there has been an explosion of support both in Québec and across North America. On May 22, the 100th day of strike, solidarity rallies took place across Canada and in the United States, including Vancouver, Calgary, Toronto, Halifax, and New York. There were even rallies in Spain and Chile, where student groups issued public statements of solidarity with Québécois.

Since April 24, students have been participating in nightly marches in Montréal. These marches have transformed into massive, city-wide protests called "casseroles" since the passage of Loi 78, named for the pots and pans protesters use to voice their dissent. The vast majority of these protests are illegal under the new legislation, but police have been struggling to keep up. Protesters are using social media to advertise demonstrations, and gatherings seem to grow each night.

The demonstrations no longer involved just students, either. As many as 500,000 marched on May 26, more than triple the total student population of Québec. One look around a protest confirms what the mainstream media have been loath to admit: demonstrators are of all ages, from all walks of life. There are students, teachers, workers, entrepreneurs, small children, grandparents.

Just as the protests no longer involve just students, they are no longer about just tuition. Many civil rights and social justice organizations have publicly endorsed the strike, including the Occupy movement and many academic and labor groups. Protesters are on strike against tuition increases, but also social injustice, wealth inequality, government corruption, and police violence.

While Charest's government has been quick to condemn isolated incidents student violence and vandalism, it has been remarkably quiet on the topic of police violence. Since students went on strike, they have been met by riot police who do not hesitate to use force. While police chief Marc Parent claims that police respond to violence from protesters, video evidence from demonstrations seems to contradict this.

Police in Montréal have employed virtually every tool available to them in attempting to quell the strike. Students have faced pepper spray, CS gas, and percussion grenades. At least two protesters have been taken to hospital with life-threatening injuries after being shot with rubber bullets, and another has permanently lost sight in one eye. On April 20 a protester was shot at point-blank range with a canister of CS gas. There are myriad examples of police using pepper spray, rubber bullets or CS gas at point-blank range and apparently without provocation. In one incident, riot police used pepper spray and batons against the clientele of an entire bar in response to a taunt from a single patron.

While police maintain that such force is used only when police fear for their safety or the safety of others, video evidence of riot police charging at protesters and beating them with batons appears to contradict such claims. Protesters have been live-streaming much of the demonstrations in order to provide evidence of such acts, and many are calling for the resignation of Chief Marc Parent and a full inquiry into police actions.

Each night around 20:00, the streets begin to fill with people sporting red squares on their clothing. The red square has been adopted as the symbol of the movement, suggestive of the students' claims that tuition hikes put them "squarely in the red." While the mainstream media have been eager to condemn the anger and violence of these demonstrations, participants paint a different picture.

There is certainly plenty of anger, anger with a government they see as intent on selling out its students and using police violence to quell dissent. However, the atmosphere at nightly "casseroles" is not angry and violent, but rather festive and joyous. Participants say the demonstrations have become a place of love, of community, of support and solidarity with one another.



A woman and her son participate in a *casserole* in Montréal on May 21. Photo credit: Allen McInnis, Montréal Gazette

It seems this sort of communal action may be infectious. Student unions in Ontario recently announced the possibility of holding a strike vote, and protesters at a solidarity rally in Calgary expressed a desire for “the entire country to go on strike, just like Québec.”

Although previous attempts at negotiation failed when a major student organization, la Coalition Large de l'Association pour une Solidarité Syndicale Étudiante (CLASSE), was excluded from talks in April, students have agreed to enter a second round of negotiations set to begin on Monday, May 28. However, as the government has said that it will not be open to discussing either the tuition hike or Loi 78, it is unlikely this next attempt at negotiation will be any more successful than the last.

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- **For more information**, I recommend visiting *Translating the Printemps Érablé*, a blog dedicated to translating French-language media reports from inside the movement itself: <http://www.quebecprotest.com/>
 - <http://youtu.be/74wWBE86-o> - A brief survey of police violence against protesters in Québec.