

Irish Times 05.12

Anti-protest law in Quebec backfires as locals rally to the cause **By Lorraine Mallinder**

In the streets of Montreal, thousands of people are banging pots and pans. The atmosphere is festive, but charged. “We don’t care about your truncheon law!” shout protesters, as they march through the streets.

They are referring to an emergency law introduced by Quebec legislators last week (18 May) in a bid to curtail student protests over increases in tuition fees. There have been over 2,500 arrests since strikes began over three months ago.

Daily scenes have ranged from light-hearted nude protests to violent clashes with riot police. The new law requires organisers of demonstrations of more than 50 people to notify police at least eight hours in advance, imposing heavy penalties on those who disobey.

But, rather than marginalising the student movement, the emergency law seems to have rallied mainstream society to the cause. Spontaneous demonstrations on 23 May resulted in 700 arrests throughout the province of Quebec.

“The law has been designed to crush a perfectly legitimate protest against rises in tuition fees. They want to silence young people, who are paying for all the mistakes made by the baby boomers,” says Andrée Blais, a mother-of-two, who is out protesting with her family.

Quebec, which has a strong social safety net and the lowest tuition fees in Canada, may seem like a curious setting for revolution. Even after a proposed hike of 75% over a seven-year period, fees will still be among the lowest in the country.

Many pundits deride the students as a bunch of “enfants-rois”, or spoiled kids. This week, the front cover of Toronto-based magazine *Maclean’s* features a student in a red mask with the headline, “Quebec’s new ruling class: How a group of entitled students went to war and shut down a province.”

But, the cause has struck a chord in the province of Quebec, which is tiring of corruption scandals involving the ruling Liberal party and the Mafia-infested construction sector, the subject of a public inquiry. Many also fear that the province's generous social provisions are under threat.

“The more militant among us have always been aware that the fight against tuition increases was only symptomatic of a bigger disease,” says Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois, spokesman for CLASSE, the province’s most militant student group, representing nearly 80,000 strikers.

Nadeau-Dubois says his movement feels “betrayed” by the government. “Since the beginning, all we’ve asked for is to be listened to, for an open and constructive negotiation on fees,” he says. He has called on members to disobey the new law.

Student unions signed a tentative deal with the provincial government this month, which attempted to remove the sting of increases by extending them over seven, rather than five years. The deal also included plans to curb university spending, turning over savings to students.

But, union members voted against the deal after government officials were perceived to have gloated in public over winning the battle. Hugo D'Amours, spokesman for Jean Charest, the provincial premier, says the government will still go ahead with plans.

"This is not a state of emergency," he says.

Nadeau-Dubois is determined to continue the struggle. "We are going to inherit very big problems in the next decade, economic, political and environmental. We have to be able to learn freely without the pressure of being indebted. That's the reason why we're fighting."

The new law has been slammed by critics ranging from the Quebec bar, which deems the legislation "unconstitutional", to 'hacktivist' collective Anonymous, which this week brought down 13 Quebec government and police websites.

Protester Louise Eusanio says the government has mismanaged the crisis. "The emergency law is the last straw," she says.

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