

Climate change - Huge march in Quebec City raises temperature

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In a wide swath of red, thousands upon thousands of people hit the streets in quiet Quebec City last Saturday with a cacophony of chants, drums and quiet conversations snaking through the tiny ancient streets of the old city emerging into a park. There organizers distributed large, square red construction paper. As one, we raised our voices and our red squares forming a giant thermometer as seen from the sky. A meme instantly appeared on social media under the thermometer : « We are reaching the boiling point, so has our planet. » It was a combination of genius and good organizing [1].

More than 25,000 people came from around Quebec, Ontario, New Brunswick and even a few from British Columbia. Organized by major environmental NGOs and supported by a broad spectrum of First Nations, social justice, trade union, feminist, and student groups, the march was led by Indigenous contingents. In addition, there were major demonstrations in cities across the country from Halifax to Victoria. All had the same demands, stop the pipelines and tar sands expansion.

« Today's march is undeniable proof that people in Quebec and across Canada want meaningful action on climate change, » said Christian Simard, General Director of Nature Québec, the march's main organizer. « Our political leaders must accept this responsibility, put in place ambitious measures to combat climate change and keep tar sands pressure out of provincial climate talks. »

While the Canadian Labour Congress was listed as a sponsor, there was little official union presence. Yet hundreds if not thousands of trade union activists marched with their union flags. I came from Toronto on a bus sponsored by the Toronto District of the Steelworkers with 50 union activists who were greeted with a warm welcome by the organizers. On the Sunday following the march, the FTQ, the largest union central in Quebec sponsored a forum to further the dialogue between the labour and environmental movements, a most important development. Many of the placards and banners oppose the Energy East pipeline, which is supported by much of the labour movement. Rather than assuming an irreconcilable difference an ongoing dialogue combined with the pressure coming from grassroots trade unionists whose presence on the march showed their leadership that they want to be on the right of side of history on climate change might lead to significant progress.

The last time I was in a march in Quebec City, there was little dialogue between the union movement and the more militant anti-globalization movement. The youth challenged the fence surrounding the Free Trade of the Americas Summit and were greeted with a phalanx of riot cops and volley after volley of tear gas [2]. I was there as a reporter for rabble, which launched on April 18 from the streets of Quebec City. That Quebec City protest was the first sign of a major criminalization of militant protest in Canada that came along with the imposition of neoliberalism. I had flashbacks to the terror of police violence 14 years ago as I walked through the streets. Some might want to see this historic march as a new chapter but I doubt it. The organizers insisted on « a family friendly demonstration, » and had the biggest marshals I've ever seen to make sure. The police were wearing red hats, not riot gear and people were in such a good mood they thought the police were in solidarity with the march because protesters were asked to wear red. I thought that was too good to be true so I asked and it turns out the red hatted police were protesting their own union negotiations

and it was just a coincidence. Just last week, police in Quebec City brutally arrested and tear gassed students who didn't ask permission [3]. Turns out freedom of association is just permitted if you follow the rules. We still have to stand up to police brutality and the criminalization of protest.

Most of the placards and banners were focused on climate change. There was little visible connection between the mass anti-austerity demonstrations organized by students and unionists over the last few weeks and this week. Nevertheless, the Act On Climate march was an historic moment in the fight against climate change in Canada and a major step forward in the movement towards merging the environmental and social justice movements as promoted in Naomi Klein's new book, not to mention a rare common action between Quebec and the rest of Canada. Congratulations to the organizers and all the participants. It was an important if not historic moment in our struggle.

Judy Rebick

P.-S.

* « Quebec City : Huge march raises temperature ». rabble.ca :
<http://rabble.ca/blogs/bloggers/judes/2015/04/quebec-climate-march#.VSrnc5gENkU.facebook>

* Judy Rebick is one of Canada's most celebrated and well-known feminist thinkers, critics and writers. She is the founder of rabble.ca.

Notes

[1] <http://rabble.ca/act-on-climate.ca>

[2] <http://rabble.ca/news/policing-people-quebec>

[3] <http://rabble.ca/blogs/bloggers/nora-loreto/2015/03/mass-arrests-québec-signal-start-printemps-2015>