Student protests rock McGill

Riot police fight student protesters with pepper spray, tear gas, and force

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MONTREAL (CUP) — More than 100 riot police overtook McGill campus on the evening of Nov. 10 to disperse student demonstrators that had gathered in front of the James Administration building.

Pepper spray, tear gas and physical force were used by police against demonstrators who were demonstrating the detainment and violence allegedly used by McGill Security against a group of McGill students who had occupied Principal Heather Munro-Blum’s office earlier in the day.

Fourteen McGill students claimed to have been assaulted by McGill Security while they occupied the fifth floor of the James Administration building for almost two hours on Thursday afternoon. The sit-in coincided with a 30,000-person-strong demonstration on the streets of Montreal against tuition hikes in the province.

At 4:05 p.m., a group of approximately 50 students entered McGill campus after news of the occupation of James Administration reached the demonstrators.

Some of the demonstrators took a megaphone to encourage others to join them. “We’re in McGill, we need more people,” screamed one demonstrator. “The crowd, come on, face the fact,” Mirkidzhan said.

Reports of violence used against the sit-in students by McGill Security reached those outside through text messages and phone calls. Demonstrators proceeded to form a human chain around the building, demanding entrance.

At roughly 4:50 p.m., four Service de police de la Ville de Montreal (SPVM) officers approached the building and entered James Administration through a back door, where students attempted to block them.

“When we heard the cops were coming ... we decided to delay them so people inside could have time to negotiate,” said Attar Bifari, president of the Association of McGill University Support Employees.

Deputy Provost (Student Life and Learning) Montreal Mendelson confirmed that he had been inside the James Administration throughout the demonstration.

“There were four police who came to survey the situation. They at no time interacted with the people upstairs,” he said.

Mendelson noted that he did not know who had called the police officers. According to Mendelson, McGill Security is “mandated — or certainly allowed — to call the police when they feel that there is a threat to people or a threat to property — but I don’t know what triggered the decision to do that.”

Moments after the four police officers arrived, about 20 students entered through a side door for a peaceful sit-in on another floor of James Administration, with McGill Security supervising.

Just before 5 p.m., 50 police on bicycles approached James Administration from the Miltenberger Building. The officers spoke with McGill Security but did not take action immediately.

Officers lined up, using their bicycles as barricades against the demonstrators. Some threw their bikes at the demonstrators who were attempting to push the police off campus.

A brief confrontation took place between demonstrators and police. Demonstrators pushed police back while officers dodged items, including sticks and water bottles, thrown by the crowd. The officers rode away, to the cheering of students.

Shortly after 5 p.m., about 50 riot police entered the campus through the Miltenberger Gates, beating their shields with batons. Police pushed the crowd towards the Arts and Ferrier buildings.

Demonstrators were pepper-sprayed after pushing back against the police lines in front of James Administration.

“The university did not call the riot squad. I can tell you that, unequivocally,” Mendelson said in an interview on Nov. 11. “I know that the police who were here called in the riot squad.”

“The four police officers looked out the window and they saw the crowd was growing — there were conversations, things seemed to be getting more heated,” Mendelson explained. “I don’t know why, what factored into their decision.”

Jean-Pierre Robert, a member of the SPVM’s public relations team, declined to answer questions as to whether the riot police had authorization to enter McGill campus.

A second wave of more than 50 riot police surrounded demonstrators on all sides. At this point, students taking part in a sit-in on the first floor of James Admin exited the building.

One demonstrator who was trying to cross police lines on the west side of James Administration was picked up, dragged, and thrown to the ground.

Police formed a line and began forcibly pushing demonstrators down the steps, towards the Milton Gates, the front gate of campus.

Demons of demonstrators were pepper sprayed by officers, while others were hit with a baton, knocked to the ground, and others who had been blinded by the spray.

Gregory Mirkidzhan, an associate professor in the environment and philosophy departments, was on his way to pick up his children from daycare.

While leaving campus, he noticed the protest outside of James Administration and stopped to observe.

“The Montreal riot police came at me, clubbed me in the ribs and stomach with a baton, knocked me over — I don’t know if it was a club that knocked me over or one of the demonstrators. You know, it all happened so fast — I popped right back up and they pepper sprayed me in the face, all the way up,” Mirkidzhan said.

“A few minutes ago, I thought I was going to die,” he added. “I thought I was going to die. I didn’t think I was going to die, but I thought I was going to die. It was scary.”

“After I was attacked, my first thought was to check with the person I had been talking with shortly before that and see if he had noticed it and ask him if I could get his information so I could corroborate if necessary,” he continued.

Looting protesters were prevented as campus police patrolled the area near the gates. Police officers were seen spraying pepper spray from bottles.

At 6 p.m., police used pepper spray and batons to clear the campus.

“The emergency alert system was not activated,” Mendelson said in an interview on Nov. 11. “We clearly had a situation that was escalating and students could be endangered and the university needed to act.”

At 6:30 p.m., police surrounded the campus.

The university had not declared a state of emergency as of 4:30 p.m., according to the university’s emergency management website.

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