

Westmount High teachers protest CAQ's religious-garb 'slippery slope'

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Teachers at Westmount High School took to the

street Thursday to protest the incoming Coalition Avenir Québec's proposed religious neutrality laws, on the day the new government was officially sworn in.

The English Montreal School Board, which represents more than 70 schools and learning institutions, indicated that it supports the teachers' stance.

Premier François Legault has pledged to ban the wearing of religious symbols (<https://montrealgazette.com/news/quebec/teachers-who-already-wear-religious-garb-could-sidestep-ban-caq-suggests>) like kippahs or hijabs in Quebec for people in positions of authority, including police, judges and teachers.

Bearing placards reading, "We teach. We don't preach" and "Honk for Human Rights," about 40 of the school's nearly 60 educators stood on Ste-Catherine St. outside the school during the morning rush hour as passing motorists honked their support.

"We are against the exclusion of any race, religion, colour, headdress, whatever it is," said Deborah Fairchild, a science and technology teacher at the school for 13 years.

"What I look like has no affect on my teaching whatsoever. ... You start with one exclusion and it's a slippery slope downward toward let's not have this race, let's not have that race ... Quite frankly, it's sick."



Westmount High School teachers protest the Coalition Avenir Québec government's plan to ban public employees from wearing religious symbols on the job. *JOHN MAHONEY / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

Several teachers have started wearing religious symbols in class in solidarity with teachers of faith and as an example to their students, many of whom wear hijabs and kippahs and other religious garb. Many teachers said they would disregard and challenge any law banning religious symbols proposed by the CAQ government.

“The election of the CAQ has me worried as a teacher and a father. If one day my two boys decide they want to wear a kippah, will they be prevented from becoming a judge, a police officer or a teacher like me?” said physical education teacher Jeff Kosow.

Thursday’s protests brought a sense of déjà vu. Teachers and students at the school held regular rallies outside the school in 2014 to protest the Parti Québécois’s proposed Charter of Values (<https://montrealgazette.com/tag/charter-of-values>), which pledged to impose similar restrictions. They also produced a video (<https://montrealteachers4change.org/2014/03/26/a-lesson-in-values-for-madame-marois-the-video-and-the-press-coverage/>) for the former premier

titled “A Lesson in Values for Mme (Pauline) Marois” expressing the values of an open, democratic society.

“It breaks my heart a little bit, the fact that we keep on going back to this garbage and nobody believes in it,” said math teacher Andri Meades, for whom the new law would hit particularly close to home. His wife, Furheen Ahmed, who teaches at the school and is currently on maternity leave, wears a hijab.

“It would mean she would have to pick between her career and her faith, and as anybody of faith would know full well, there’s no choice. It’s your faith, this is your way of life. So she would absolutely have to either quit her job or get fired. And she’s made it clear she’s not going to quit. ...

“She’s a born and raised Quebecer and now all of a sudden the province is telling her she’s not an equal Quebecer. It’s not something you take very lightly.”

English Montreal School Board spokesman Michael Cohen said the teachers’ initiative echoes the sentiment of the board.

“If they proceed with this type of legislation and ask us to tell our teachers you can’t wear a kippah or a hijab, our intention is to not follow that rule,” he said. “Our board does not intend on complying with such a law.”

It’s unclear what would happen if it comes to that, Cohen said. The board never received a “proper reply” when it asked the PQ in 2014 what would happen in the event of non-compliance, he said.

Teachers said the recently proposed grandfathering-in of the religious symbols ban was not sufficient.

“François Legault is PQ disguised as a CAQ — he’s trying to sugarcoat his agenda so his people will swallow it,” Fairchild said. “Sugarcoating it or no, poison is still poison. ... As teachers we teach our students not to be silent in the face of bullying. We will not be silent in the face of

government bullying.”

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