

Beyond the Québec Student Strike

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While it is difficult to predict the lasting consequences of the 2012 student strike in Québec, a few things are certain. The strike has fostered a climate of dissent and a respect for direct democracy and [direct action](#) for a whole generation. The effectiveness and appeal of [combative](#) syndicalist organizing is not likely to fade from our memories anytime soon, and the broader implications of the strike are also significant. Youth in Québec joined a string of regions across the world resisting neoliberalism and making strong appeals for something radically different. The global struggles ahead are overwhelming, and any further advances depend largely upon the resilience of the movements that have emerged over the past few years in these troubling times.

Students in Québec are working to keep an incredible level of momentum going into 2013, organizing days of action and strike activity in the months ahead. This began with a popular demonstration led by CLASSE on the streets of Montréal on September 22, which was declared illegal from the outset and brought to an abrupt halt by police under the auspices of [municipal legislation](#). Well-attended general assemblies are still taking place in university and college departments and faculties across the province.

CLASSE itself has gone dormant, as this coalition was always a temporary enlargement of the permanent syndicalist organization, [l'Association pour une Solidarité Syndicale Étudiante](#) (ASSÉ or the Association for Solidarity among Student Unions).

Action Plan for 2013

ASSÉ members are in the process of developing an ambitious action plan for 2013. At the September 29-30 ASSÉ Congress, members agreed on their 2012-13 annual campaign, "en marche vers la gratuité scolaire," or "on the march toward free education." The goal of the campaign is to push for free education and to resist government plans to index tuition to inflation.

ASSÉ members also agreed at Congress to fully support the October 18 [Global Day of Action](#) against the commercialization of education, joining dozens of student organizations across the world in coordinated action. This is in conjunction with a [Global Education Strike](#) called by the International Student Movement, with student strike activity taking place in Germany, Québec, Serbia, Italy, Mexico, Indonesia and elsewhere. Sociology and Anthropology students at the University of Québec in Chicoutimi have already voted to go on a [one week strike](#) between November 14 and the 21st, stressing their opposition to neoliberalism and the privatization of education. Other student unions and associations have also voted to take part in the global strike, and more plan on taking a position in the coming

weeks.

CLASSE has also been invited to take part in speaking tours and workshops in [Canada](#), Australia, South America and elsewhere as student activists attempt to learn from what Peter Hallward called "[the threat of Québec's good example](#)." One can only hope that the movement in Québec will resonate with other regions and spur similar levels of engagement.

A Liberating Experience

Looking back on the student strike is important, not out of nostalgia but of political necessity. Philosophical, personal, political and tactical insights will start emerging in Québec and more broadly, with lasting consequences for the way students organize and act.

By blocking classrooms and lecture halls, the Québec student strike served as a serious disruption of the foundations of the modern academy. One of the enduring questions is the conflict between individual desire to access classes and the [collective will](#) to enforce a student strike mandate voted for in general assemblies. This was done on the basis that denying someone access to class would grant far more people their right to education well into the future.

Blocking classrooms for a sustained period of time causes ripple effects well beyond the colleges and universities. The colleges and universities rely upon a [regular flow](#) of students through the system, so a blockage to this flow is highly disruptive, with immediate consequences for the institutions and the state. Students are also a latent source of cheap labour and a strike delays their entry into the labour market, where students are purchased at a bargain. The tourism industry in Québec was [particularly vocal](#) about potential labour shortages this past summer, but [hospitals](#) and municipal governments also warned of labour shortages.

A student strike effectively blocks the regular flow of "human capital" through the system, which offers students powerful political leverage and also explains why such coercive measures were employed against us. Yet it is the effective use of a student strike that explains why Québec tuition remains comparatively low by North American standards.

A number of things happen once the flow of students through the system is disrupted. All of the major institutions use their substantial power to try and suppress the disruption and enforce "social order" again, or so-called peace. It is only when the system is seriously disturbed that the coercive power of state capitalism becomes readily apparent.

The inverse also holds true. Even with the onset of serious coercion, many students speak about how liberating the strike was. The often conformist and hierarchical character of the university and daily life was effectively blocked, so alternative spaces were developed to share ideas and create. This was possibly one of the most creative and intellectually challenging times for many of our peers. Teach-ins and workshops were held in public or appropriated spaces, and creative energies flourished. We learned how the state capitalism worked by confronting it.

In one particularly memorable teach-in on an appropriated street outside of Concordia University, the very topic of discussion (public space) became an issue of practical necessity as the police threatened to arrest anyone who remained in the street. Those of us present

collectively attempted to decide on how to respond – whether to comply with or defy the police order. The result was mixed between fractions prepared to hold the street and risk arrest and those who wanted to march on the office of then-Québec premier, Jean Charest. He is now simply a memory following the latest provincial election, wiped aside by the strike movement.

Movement Victory?

There remains [significant discussion](#) about use of the term “victory” to describe the repeal of proposed tuition hikes. The movement in itself is something worth celebrating. Students built their own democratic structures on a sweeping scale, fostering general assemblies within their university and college departments and faculties across the province, bringing hundreds of thousands into the streets in the process. Students did this in the face of relentless cynicism and distortion from corporate media. A careful analysis of media coverage of the movement would reveal an anti-strike bias so severe as to merit the term propaganda. This was corporate propaganda, plain and simple.

And students bore the brunt of these insults and degradations, as media coverage did foster a culture of dehumanization. When youth are painted as violent and extreme, it becomes far easier for authorities to impose a level of oppression that would otherwise not be tolerated. The media bear a great deal of blame for some of the serious and critical injuries that were inflicted upon students by an overwhelming police and state apparatus. This was coupled with a troubling piece of legislation called Bill 78 (or Law 12), which undermined basic rights and freedoms, including the right to free assembly.

The movement endured all of this, spurring a provincial election and effectively helping remove the provincial Liberal Party from power. Author and activist [Yves Engler](#) has documented some important reforms that have emerged since the PQ came to power, including a moratorium on the tuition hike (for now), the closure of the Gentilly-2 nuclear reactor, a moratorium on shale gas fracking and a long-overdue withdrawal of subsidies to the asbestos industry. The PQ also made the sensible step of introducing new tax bracket for the wealthiest of Québec at a time when inequality in the province is at a [30 year high](#). These are important steps, but a long way from the kind of changes that are needed today. This also comes in conjunction with a discomfiting level of exclusionary rhetoric from the PQ, or what sovereigntist Jean Dorion called “[a cover for intolerance](#)” in a public letter disassociating himself from the party.

It is a point of fact that the PQ only adopted its positions because of popular pressure, but student movements are not simply militant lobby groups with the goal of policy reform. They often exist to give an alternative vision of society based on direct democracy, real equality and the common good. Focusing on the repeal of the tuition hike may obscure these transformative struggles. There is a desire within the movement for fundamental change which cannot be created through existing institutions.

The co-spokespersons of CLASSE describe this alternative vision with beautiful clarity in their [recent Toronto Star column](#). They write that we have a:

“broken system of democracy that comes up for air once every four years, in which politicians prefer the murmurs of business lobbyists to the voices of those they supposedly represent. Our faith is in direct, participatory democracy, which we practise in assemblies of thousands where every student can give input into the decisions that impact them.

“Our commitment to genuine democracy is a reflection of the type of society we seek to build: one that is more equal, not less, and revolves around the needs of people, not corporations.”

This was an attempt to foster a widespread social movement autonomously from electoral politics. The strike raised issues of ecological degradation and crisis, sexism, racism and anti-imperialism – the likes of which cannot be filtered into the election outcome or the repeal of a tuition hike. The repeal of the tuition hike was a victory won through combative syndicalism, but this was only part of a broader struggle with no shortage of significant challenges ahead.

Broadening the Struggle

Student activism in Québec has always been closely linked with anti-imperial struggles and other campaigns for social justice, with many student associations going on [strike in 2003](#) against the Iraq War. More recently, the United States and Israel are threatening military action against Iran in violation of the UN Charter as imperial wars of aggression continue. Student activists at McGill University appropriated university space early this month to host a teach-in about the potential for military intervention in Iran, and a general meeting took place at Concordia University to discuss anti-war organizing.

In the Caribbean, the Canadian Forces signed an agreement with Jamaican officials to establish a [forward operating hub](#) with access to a port, airport and military base. This comes as the [U.S. has established](#) new bases in Colombia and reactivated the Fourth Fleet, a naval force in the region that was disbanded in the 1950s. The possibility of further intervention in the region is real.

This comes with greater coercion within Canada as well. Prison guards are [increasingly resorting](#) to the use of pepper spray, batons and guns because of overcrowding, a good signal of the Conservative tough-on-crime agenda. The police and surveillance budget for the Québec student strike alone was sweeping, as unions and grassroots organizations call for an [independent inquiry](#) into police brutality and practices during the strike. [More arrests were made](#) during the student strike than the G20 Summit in Toronto, and many participants were critically injured.

This comes in conjunction with the effective demonization of broader segments of society as the Conservatives warn of “Islamicism,” environmental and indigenous “extremists” and other vague threats to “national security.” Any sensible person knows the real threat to human security is posed by global warming, which is itself partially attributed to the Canadian tar sands and the federal and provincial policies that sustain this disastrous trajectory. Scientists are warning of “[unprecedented](#)” rates of melting arctic sea ice as the tar sands and its constituent pipelines proceed apace. There will be a strong student presence at the upcoming [Power Shift](#) conference in Ottawa as part of the urgent struggle for climate justice, and indigenous solidarity work is also taking place around the Plan Nord, an economic development plan launched by the former Liberal government.

These challenges and more should offer a clear signal that the Québec movement was only one part of a broader struggle. The co-spokespersons of CLASSE put it eloquently in closing their *Toronto Star* column: “the social movement of the past year has taught us that police batons and corrupt politicians will not always prevail over the power of ideas. Ours is an age of cynicism, but we are learning that our dreams can be made real.” For many, the repeal of

the tuition hike was simply one more step toward free education and a free society. •

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