

The Quebec Student Strike Celebrates Its 100th Day

“We Didn’t Know It Was Impossible, So We Did It!”

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Students in Quebec are marking their 100th day of an unlimited general strike on Tuesday, May 22nd, the culmination of the most stunning mass protest movements of recent months and North America’s largest student movement in years. In fact, the mobilizations in Quebec might just be Canada’s Arab Spring.

Students have been organizing against tuition hikes for nearly one and a half years, when the Quebec government first proposed to raise tuition fees by 75% over five years (amended to 82% over seven years by the government at the end of April). Before the general strike began in February, protests, demos, trainings, letter writing campaigns and attempts to negotiate in good faith with the government were consistently met with obstinate silence from the Charest administration. For the students there has been a growing sense of urgency and a shared recognition that increased tuition means a heavier student debt burden, hundreds of more hours a year spent working instead of studying, less access for working class and lower class students, and a shift in university culture toward the market, the commodification of education, the financialization of student life, and the privatization of the university.

Even if fees increase, Quebec students would be paying less than other provinces in Canada, a gap the provincial government has been aiming to close. But so far every time the administration has proposed to do so, students have gone on strike. Deep in the Quebec struggle is a culture of solidarity and security, a social fabric, a sense of community that endures and mobilizes a powerful defense of their commonwealth. Call it what you will, it is precisely this that Margaret Thatcher declared war upon on May 1st 1981 when she said that the project of neoliberalism is to change the heart and soul of a ‘collectivist’ spirit, and its means is economics. Indeed, the Finance Minister of the Quebec Liberal government recently called its austerity policies “a cultural revolution” and they are not shy about their plan to reorganize Quebecois life through fiscal discipline. The Modèle québécois of social collectivism (in its traditional social democratic sensibility, but also, and more importantly, its directly democratic ethic that has emerged in the course of the last 14 weeks of strike) is the target of these policies, specifically through education and health. This is what explains the Charest government’s attempts to break the strike and destroy the student unions.

Student unionism is particularly strong in Quebec, and for a reason: they are inherently political, engaging, and participatory, using principles of direct democracy in weekly general assemblies. A dispersal of power, where students have a direct role in shaping the culture of university life through the policies and activities of the unions has been the backbone of the growing movement against tuition hikes, and the secret to why it has been able to mobilize such a broad and popular base. Yet, while a rejection of political parties and emphasis on

direct democracy and militancy infuse the movement, there are in reality a range of unions—from the combative wing of the movement, such as the Association pour une Solidarité Syndicale Étudiante (ASSÉ) that demands free education, to more corporatist and mainstream student unions that integrate with bourgeois political parties.

But this struggle represents more than students. It represents an attack on the middle class and lower income families, their sense of social cohesion, and the social entitlement and equality of access to public services amid rising cost of living. The strikes register across these domains of everyday life, in the university, in the family home, the workplace, and the hospital, where increasingly the same growing resentment of the imposition of austerity measures in Quebec emerge, as the tuition increases coincide with the first ever “health tax,” alongside a 20% increase in hydro rates, the raising of the federal retirement age to 67, as well as mass layoffs.

A chronology of the last weeks of the movement

On November 10th, over 200,000 students went on a one-day strike, and 30,000 took to the streets. 20,000 of which marched directly to Charest’s Montreal office to demonstrate against rising fees. Hundreds, including the Quebec Women’s Federation, shut down the Montreal Stock Exchange in mid-February, a site dear to the 1%, and where the Charest government, who had so far been ignoring the budding movement, would certainly devote its rapt attention.

By February 23rd, forty thousand post-secondary students across the province joined the unlimited general strike. Thousands of students occupied the Jacques Cartier Bridge. If the tactical approaches of the movement had been ignored by university administrations and the provincial government in its first weeks, by March 22nd, student unions such as CLASSE (The Coalition large de l’Association pour une Solidarite Syndaicale Etudiante), whose 80,000 members have been leading the strike, couldn’t be missed. Since then, they have shifted focus toward targeting governmental offices, ministries, and crown corporations, placing strategic emphasis on economic disruption, an approach to direct action that has had precedence in many earlier urban protest movements in the last decade or so.

On March 22nd, as over 300,000 students had been on strike, a massive march in the streets inaugurated the Maple Spring (“Printemps Érable,” a play on words in French), with university after university, and college after college, going on strike. Two months later, on Tuesday, May 22nd, the Quebec students’ unlimited strike will celebrate its 100th day, already one of the largest student mobilizations in recent history. During 100 days of strike, contempt, and resistance, students have mobilized against steep tuition increases, austerity and debt, and the criminalization of the right to education.

On Friday, a friend Lilian Radovac, who has been active in the student mobilizations in Montreal, described a cultural shift expanding in the cracks of everyday austerity:

“For years, May ’68 was a dry, dusty thing other people theorized about in poor translations, but these last months, something like it has been happening in the crevices of our vie quotidienne. How strange that it is just there, between bus rides and doctor’s appointments and trips to the grocery store, a thing that is so extraordinary and so bizarrely normal at the same time. The metro has been shut down by smoke bombs? Oh well, I feel like a walk anyway.

Did it feel like this when OWS started? It must have.”

Each week, in local general assemblies of student associations, students have voted to sustain the ‘renewable general strike’. With over 180 different unions representing some 170,000 students, university departments and the government can no longer hope the movement will dwindle on its own, and are increasingly forced to repress the movement actively. Indeed, days after the Education Minister Line Beauchamp resigned on May 14th over failed negotiations with student leaders, the Quebec Government enacted a special emergency law.

Bill 78 specifically targets the massive student assemblies and mobilizations in order to break the growing strike and destroy the power of the student union. One member of the Quebec political opposition used the term “Loi Fuck” to refer to the blunt and draconian tool that outlaws public assembly, imposes harsh fines for strike activity (even tacit support), and effectively makes organizing an arrestable offense. The bill also gives more power to the police in enforcing student protest. Indeed, during the last many weeks of escalating street demos, police have repeatedly preempted demonstrations with CS gas, sound grenades, ‘blast disperser’ grenades, and rubber bullets. Nevertheless, it is not clear how this law will be used in the coming days and weeks, or whether it will be successful in intimidating students.

An emergency law announced on the previous Wednesday “suspended” the semester for many CEGEP (academic and vocational college) and university students, with provisions for classes to be postponed until August. Provisions of Bill 78 that followed include:

Fines of between \$1,000 and \$5,000 for anyone who prevents someone from entering an educational institution.

Steep penalties of \$7,000 and \$35,000 for anyone deemed a ‘student leader’ and between \$25,000 and \$125,000 for unions or student associations. Fines double after the first offense.

Plans for public demonstrations involving more than 50 people (originally 8) must be submitted to the police eight hours in advance, and must detail itinerary, duration and time at which they are being held.

Offering encouragement, tacitly supporting, or promoting protest at a school, either is subject to punishment.

In Montreal, specifically, a new municipal anti-mask law accompanies Bill 78, and another has been proposed at the federal level. With Charest’s attempts to legislate the end of the student movement, the struggle has deepened and is now at a turning point. Yet, on its 100th day of an unlimited general strike, the movement does not show any signs of slowing down or veering from its median tactic of general assemblies, its preferred direct action orientation, and its culture of horizontal democracy.

The return of the red square and our right to assembly

Students in Quebec have popularized the symbol of the “red square” to signify being financially “squarely in the red” amid tuition hikes, cuts in social entitlements, and the specter of spiraling student and consumer debt. As their movement has powerfully reminded us, we are all ‘in the red’ as long as the 1% imposes upon us austerity, debt, and repression.

The politics of austerity and the increased policing of everyday life reveal themselves in these instances to be inseparably linked. We can see the direct link between tuition hikes and the criminalization of assembly in Quebec, just as we can see Bloomberg's management through "free speech zones" of political protest, the silencing of media, and the increased police aggression in suppressing the Occupy Wall Street movement. Thus, solidarity with Quebec students is also important work in defense of our right to demonstrate here and everywhere. When times of crisis provoke ramped up police power and allow desperate politicians to pass "emergency laws" that target unquiet sectors of the population, we are certain that the class balance of present society is threatened. But it is a cautious joy we should preach, along with the sober insight that without powerful international solidarity and coordination, as James Baldwin once wrote to Angela Davis, "if they take you in the morning, they will be coming for us that night."

The police backlash—through intimidation, repression, and wanton brutality—we have faced in NYC for trying to assemble is enormous. On May 2nd, students at Brooklyn College were met with police hostility as they demonstrated against policies that restrict access to education for lower-income students. Wherever the site of struggle, the very idea of opening up space for collective imagination is policed. But we are not battling on the plane of the imaginary. An attack in Quebec on the right to assemble, if unchallenged through coordinated international solidarity, will have real and chilling effects on our movements here.

Solidarity in NYC

Speaking about the Quebec students' strike in New York, there is often enthusiasm and support, if not bewilderment upon learning of the size and power of their movement, something that the media blackout in the U.S. has successfully eclipsed. But there is also a bit of shoulder shrugging. "Are they really on strike for \$250 dollars?" one unmoved passerby queried as we were wrapping up an assembly in the park on Sunday. Indeed more popular education needs to be done here on the plight of students in the climate of this crisis. But the student struggle, here in NYC as in Quebec, is not only a struggle for the student: it is about access to education for all regardless of economic circumstance, a challenge to the very economic and political planning that has been transforming our cities into spaces for the elite over the last three decades.

This past weekend, several groups from Occupy Wall Street and other organizations held an assembly to address these "emergency laws" and discuss solidarity with Quebec on Tuesday. Immediately a robust day was in the works: At 2PM on Tuesday, the time marches are slated to begin in Montreal, demonstrators in NYC will gather at the Quebec Government Offices at 1 Rockefeller Plaza. The Free University, which organized a day of free education in Madison Square Park on May Day, is hosting a pop-up occupation open to all students, educators, and community members. At 5PM, there will be a gathering on the north side of the fountain in Washington Square Park, where people will paint banners, make 'book bloc' shields, and cut red squares for the evening march. At 6PM, there will be a teach in/speak out assembly about the Quebec student strike, the emergency laws, and the criminalization of dissent, followed by a number of self-organized lectures, workshops, skill-shares, and discussions.

In coordination with Quebec students who have been holding nightly assemblies, there will also be an assembly and march originating from Washington Square Park at 8PM to celebrate the successes of the student movement and to march against repressive anti-

protest laws worldwide.

On this day, in solidarity with our sisters and brothers in Quebec, we will paint the town red.



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