

**Organize to strike, fight to win!**

**Quebec's 2012 student strike**

# Preamble

In February 2012, students in [Quebec](#) launched an unlimited general strike to fight back against a 75% hike in university tuition fees. Contrary to the expectations of many, the strike movement lasted more than six months, morphing into one of the largest periods of social unrest the province had ever seen.

In the global context of the commodification of education, youth and students everywhere are becoming increasingly conscious of the need to organize as a means to defend education as a social right.

The text you'll find on this site was written in the aftermath of the strike by a few students who were involved in various official and unofficial capacities during the strike and the months and years leading up to it.

Having travelled outside of the province to speak to students and activists about the strike, some of us were struck by the need for deeper analysis as well as practical pointers for those wishing to draw inspiration for their own struggles.

This pamphlet, which addresses the history of the 2012 Quebec student strike, as well as many related topics, is our humble attempt to contribute to the efforts of those wanting to build democratic and combative social movements, with a strong potential to win.

## Context

### The education system

When discussing the education system in Quebec, an important and unique characteristic should be taken into account. Between high school and university, there's an institution called the [CEGEP](#), where students can choose to enroll in either a two-year program or a three-year technical program. The former leads to university while the latter is oriented toward direct integration into the job market. In the context of Quebec and this text, they are also commonly referred to as colleges.

Important aspects of these CEGEP's (colleges) include the mixing of students from different programs in core classes such as French, philosophy and sports, as well as the fact that the education is free, excluding nominal administration and other fees.

Because of the existence of these institutions, university undergraduate programs are only three years long (as opposed to four years found elsewhere in Canada and the USA) and high schools have one less year (eleven, instead of twelve).

Universities in Quebec, like CEGEPs, are all state-funded for the most part, and tuition (contribution by students) is fixed by law: universities can't choose to charge higher or lower tuition, except for the institutional fees such as registration, administration etc. Furthermore, tuition doesn't vary from one program to another.

While the total cost of enrollment has gone up over the years through institutional fees, the average cost of attending university for a year in Quebec -- around \$2500 -- is still relatively low by international standards. This is partially due to the fact that in 1968, after a general student strike, tuition was frozen at \$500 a year. The tuition remained frozen up until 1990 when it was raised to \$930 and again in 2007. Even so, when the government announced in 2011 that it would increase the tuition fees by \$1625, it created a lot of discontent.

### The student unions

Though student unions in Quebec have existed in their current form since the mid-sixties, they were only recognised by [law](#) in 1983. The law establishes various privileges for student unions such as automatic membership and mandatory dues from all students, seats on various councils such as the administrative board, designated office space and a billboard provided by the campus.

In CEGEPs, only one student union exists per institution. This is important, because 60% of CEGEP students are enrolled in a technical program. Even though most of them don't go on to university, and a hike in university tuition fees is unlikely to affect them directly, as members of the student union they're encouraged to participate in discussions, decision-making and organizing. Each CEGEP student union typically has a membership

of two to six thousand students. In total, CEGEP students make up about 200,000 of the 450,000 students enrolled in post-secondary education in Quebec.

In universities, the structure of student unions is less homogeneous; it varies from one institution to another. There are small departmental unions, unions based on the university programs and large, campus-wide unions. Some unions are structured as federations of smaller unions, others not. Some lump both undergrad and grad students into one union, while in other institutions they'll have separate bodies. As a result of all this, university student unions tend to exhibit more sectarian dynamics, with unions in different parts of the same university that could have entirely different politics and practices, ranging from radical and anti-capitalist to complacent and conservative.

In addition to these local unions, there are also province-wide federations of unions. Three exist today in Quebec : Fédération étudiante collégiale du Québec (FECQ), Fédération étudiante universitaire du Québec (FEUQ) and Association pour une solidarité syndicale étudiante (ASSE).

FECQ and FEUQ are sister organizations, the former grouping CEGEP student unions and the latter, campus-wide university student unions or governments. Both are quite conventional unions, similar to labour federations. Their organizing is top-down, highly centralized and bureaucratic. In terms of politics, they defend leftist values, opposed the tuition fee hike and supported the strike -- in limited fashion. The two student groups are close to the Parti Québécois, one of the two mainstream political parties in the province. Before the 2012 strike, together they represented over 180,000 students and were considered by politicians and media as the legitimate representatives of students.

ASSE, with its emphasis on direct democracy and direct action, is the more radical union. Before the strike, it had a membership of only 45,000 students. With an understanding that more unions would need to join to build a sufficiently large opposition movement, ASSE created a strike coalition, Coalition large de l'ASSE (CLASSE) by temporarily opening up its structures and conditions to join.

### What is an *unlimited general student strike*?

It's important to understand what is meant by "unlimited general strike". In Quebec, a student strike isn't just a bunch of rallies, marches and occupations. The strike is a complete shutdown of all courses on campus : no classes, no exams and no evaluations are to take place while the strike is on. Once the strike is voted in a general assembly and comes into effect, picket lines are erected and classrooms are emptied. Everyone, students and faculty alike, is forced to respect the strike mandate. Universities and colleges affected by the strike see their academic calendars disrupted, and since no classes or grading is allowed to happen, degrees can't be awarded.

While student unions are recognized by university administrations and by the government, student strikes, however, have no such legal standing. Although not illegal in and of themselves, most of the tactics used by students to enforce their strikes are.

A common argument made to delegitimize this tactic suggests that students were the only ones losing out by going on strike. Since they already paid for the education, boycotting it made no sense. Would anyone go to Wal-Mart, buy a TV and then just leave it boxed up in the living room as a form of protest?

However, student strikes are more similar to worker strikes than they might seem at first glance. Of course, students are penalized by missing their classes, just like workers losing out on their paycheck. But, when the goal is to massively paralyze the education system - - which can be understood as a factory producing wage workers -- then huge sectors of the economy could be threatened by a workforce shortage.

The fact that business and state officials have claimed and shown that student strikes shouldn't be tolerated is further proof that they're an effective way of applying pressure.

In short, the *strike* is a complete blockade of classes; it's *unlimited* when the general assemblies vote to maintain this blockade as long as the issue isn't settled; and it's *general* when lots of unions and campuses join the movement.

During the 2012 strike, most student unions held general assemblies every week to decide whether or not to stay on strike until the next assembly. While doing so, students meeting each other could also discuss the orientation and the actions of the movement. These regular and populous assemblies were fundamental in creating empowerment and a deep investment into the movement among students.

In large universities with tens of thousands of students, the strike was voted and enforced at the departmental or the school level, never campus-wide. Not only is it virtually impossible to build up enough cohesion to effectively enforce a strike at that level, but holding regular general assemblies with more than about 3000 participants is a logistical nightmare. On the other hand, strikes in smaller institutions, (typically under 7000 students) were voted and enforced campus-wide.

## Past student strikes

Any context to the 2012 student strike in Quebec wouldn't be complete without a few words about the history of the student movement in the province.

It wasn't the first time students resorted to an unlimited general strike as a means of protest. This type of collective action by the student movement actually goes back a long way; up to 1968 to be exact. Similar strikes also happened in 1974, 1978, 1986, 1988, 1990, 1996 and 2005. In the majority of cases, students were successful in either blocking

counter-reforms or making outright gains in terms of keeping tuition low and winning improvements to student financial aid, a government program of loans and bursaries.

When bringing up the necessity of an unlimited general strike, student unions could draw on a history of struggles in which students not only gave themselves a fighting chance, but actually made real, tangible change.

Comparing 2012 with previous student strikes in the province isn't without its limits, however. Never before had a strike movement involved so many students and campuses all at once. Already, the 2005 strike had established a record in terms of duration of a student strike (7 weeks), and yet that record was shattered by students in 2012, with the strike lasting over six months.

## Events leading up to strike

By the time the government of Quebec announced the tuition hike in 2012, it was already a well-known policy item of the ruling party. In fact, tuition had already been increasing steadily by about \$100 a year since 2007. When this previous hike came into effect, we tried to launch an unlimited general strike in opposition, but failed: the strike never got started.

In March 2010, the government announced its intention to step up the rate of increase starting in September 2012, but without giving out any specific details. We knew, however, that the hike would be bigger and hit harder than in 2007. Concrete plans were drawn up to block the new hike using an unlimited general strike.

But the tuition hike was quite an important policy for the government. Along with implementing new user-fees and a special tax in the public healthcare sector<sup>1</sup> as well as a hike in electricity fees<sup>2</sup>, the hike was part of a so-called “cultural revolution” in public services pricing pushed by the province’s finance minister. These measures were justified by the precarious state of public finances and the need to progressively eliminate the deficit -- a discourse very much in tune with austerity politics being implemented globally.

Though we knew that taking on such a central policy for the government would be difficult, we couldn't imagine student unions standing idle.

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<sup>1</sup> [Health-care in Quebec is in large part free and public since the 1960's.](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Electricity is produced and distributed by a single, state-owned corporation. Its prices are regulated by law.](#)

## Building the Movement

### Unions

One of the most crucial aspect of the 2012 Quebec student strike is that it was driven almost exclusively by student unions. This may seem surprising given the fact that today, representative student organisations everywhere seem almost completely co-opted by administrations and political parties. Many shy away from political action altogether and focus heavily on entertainment and cultural activities. By allowing themselves to become breeding grounds for managers and politicians, they have made themselves powerless to challenge education policies at any significant level.

Of course, many student unions in Quebec fit this description. But what's characteristic of the student movement in Quebec is its strong syndicalist wing. Hailing from the very beginnings of student action in the sixties and inspired by early labor movements, it has refused to break from its history of radicalism. At the same time, it has kept alive a model of collective action: syndicalism.

While syndicalist unions in the student setting might not be a given, they can still make a lot of sense. To be sure, students don't form a homogenous class to the same degree that workers do. On any given campus, students with a really wealthy background might rub shoulders with others who can barely make ends meet. But despite these different socio-economic backgrounds, students do form a community and they do have a certain set of common interests, independent of their political, philosophical or religious opinions. There is no shortage of issues which can cement support for student unions and which call out for protest.

At the same time, faced with strong adversity and a difficult organising context, many will choose to form or join campus activist clubs. Yet these tiny groups with little resources can't hope to give birth to a movement on the scale of the 2012 Quebec student strike. As Jonathan Matthew Smucker of Altnet writes, "In a society that is self-selecting into ever more specific micro-aggregations, it makes sense that activism itself could become one such little niche. But when it comes to challenging entrenched power, we need more than little niches."<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, due to their nature, student unions aren't automatically geared toward empowerment and social change. Through experience, the Quebec student movement has found certain useful concepts and practices which can help steer such organisations toward these goals.

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<sup>3</sup><http://www.altnet.org/print/visions/why-we-cant-depend-activists-create-change>

## Legitimacy

While the perception of legitimacy isn't by itself an effective means to create change, it is important in creating community. How can a student union or a student strike be viewed as legitimate beyond a tiny group of activists? One has to begin by making the distinction between two different levels of legitimacy : internal and external.

*Internal legitimacy* reflects how legitimate the movement is in the eyes of the participants. This element is crucial because it's a major factor influencing cohesion, resilience in the face of opposition, and broadness of the movement.

*External legitimacy* is the opposite: how legitimate the movement is for non-students or the general public. Of course external legitimacy is also important, but as activists, we have a lot less sway over this factor.

By definition, the movement to block the hike was a countercurrent. The political class, economic elite and media pundits largely supported the tuition hike. At the start of the campaign, none of the mainstream political parties opposed the hike and the propaganda machine had already been hard at work to push the idea that students needed to pay more and more for the privilege of higher education. Students themselves were not immune to its effects, so we knew that it would be difficult to effectively counter the neoliberal myths.

In this context, we knew that only a vast, grassroots effort to reach out to students would be powerful enough to have some measure of success. This means *direct, non-mediated discussion*: in hallways, classrooms, cafeterias and other places where students congregate. Debates and assemblies were organized specifically to discuss the tuition hike, and student unions made their own research and publications that addressed the issue, and distributed them hand-to-hand as part of their efforts to reach out.

This also explains why external legitimacy is harder to build up: progressive movements don't have the means to establish the same kind of large-scale, direct discussion with millions of people.

## Building leverage

In 2010, as organizing was ramping up, a majority of Quebecois were already favorable to the tuition hike, thanks to generous mass media coverage given to politicians to defend their project as well as sympathetic editorials. The external legitimacy of the movement was relatively low. Media rarely bothered to seriously report on the opinions and ideas of students regarding the hike. Student unions couldn't hope to reverse that trend and force the issue into public debate through lobbyism and representation.

However, by attempting to disrupt business as usual, as social movements have done historically to further progressive causes, students could force the government into negotiations and make their resistance apparent to the public eye. We believed that disrupting economic and governmental activity was our best chance at building leverage against the political leadership.

Of course, we expected state repression before any negotiations took place, but we were confident in our ability to resist it. If the movement could cope with the attacks of the state, it would surely be victorious. Based on past experiences, we knew that an unlimited general strike had that kind of potential.

For such a strike to be successful, it needs very strong internal legitimacy. In that regard, *escalation of tactics* and *direct democracy* are two of ASSE's (or CLASSE's) most important principles. Through their application, we could convince more and more people to oppose the tuition hike and become involved in the process of building resistance.

### Escalation of Tactics

This strategy consists in designing an action plan that proposes a series of actions that are progressively more radical, beginning with actions that aren't very engaging for participants and are easy to take part. For example: petitions, political flash mobs or taking a position in a general assembly. We knew these tactics, by themselves, didn't contribute much to stopping the hike. But before organizing more ambitious and effective protests, we needed to build up activist communities in many different CEGEPs (colleges) and universities. In colleges, where students are generally aged between 17 and 20 years old and turnover is high, political consciousness among the student body is low. Organizing simple actions like petitioning offers an opportunity for such students who are interested in doing something about the tuition hike and who might otherwise be very reluctant to get involved in anything that could lead to confrontation.

A lot of our collective experience as activists in Quebec taught us that building political campaigns through progressive involvement of participants is much more effective in elevating people's political consciousness than mere information or propaganda campaigns. When a petition you've worked on fails to produce any results, when your pacifist sit-in is attacked by police or when a demonstration you were in is ridiculed or mocked in newspapers or on the radio, it tends to highlight the limits and contradictions of the system much better than a flyer might. Of course, it's a process that takes time and which asks of experienced activists who might be veterans of radical movements to take part in some organizing that they would otherwise brush off as being a waste of effort.

Between 2010 and 2012, our commitment to this process led to a new generation of involved students who in turn, contributed massively to get more of their colleagues involved. In time, our rallies grew larger and larger and local unions were increasingly active and dynamic. On many campuses, we could count on solid cores of activists who eventually reached the conclusion, largely by themselves, that the only way to stop the hike was with an unlimited general student strike.

### Direct democracy

Yet, escalation of tactics alone isn't enough. Getting people involved needs to go beyond simply asking people to join actions. Building a rock-solid basis for a movement requires

giving real power in the hands of participants and bringing them to the center of the decision-making process.

This idea is embodied in ASSE's (CLASSE) core principle of direct democracy. A simple, democratic, transparent structure was crucial to the success of our strike.

Firstly, the supreme ruling body in local unions is the General Assembly, sometimes also called the general membership meeting. Elected officials such as members of the executive or administrative boards are under the authority of this assembly, which is open to the union's entire membership.

Everyone is equal during these meetings: staff and board members aren't given any kinds of privileges such as special seating in front of the assembly or right-of-reply. Rules of order, such as "Robert's Rules of Order" are used and strictly applied by a facilitator as a means of structuring the meeting and orienting debates toward collective decision-making. Applying rules of order isn't always easy and sometimes there's a temptation to do away with them altogether. However, in our experience, a formal structure and process which everyone recognises and which can be applied openly and respectfully is much better than informal structure where shadowy power relationships between participants can influence the decision-making process to the advantage of an individual or a group. To ensure that knowledge of the rules of order in itself doesn't become a source of inequality among participants, unions publish and make sure the rules of order are available to all, while facilitators take time as needed to explain them and make sure everyone in the meeting understands the processes.

As members of the union, elected union officials can bring motions to the floor and participate in discussion; but once the general assembly has passed a motion, their role is to apply that decision: not to discuss it or debate it further. Acting against general assembly resolutions is a grave offense and grounds for impeachment.

At the provincial level, decisions are made by a congress composed of delegates of every local union. Delegates are not representatives of their union's membership, entitled to speak on behalf of the student body, nor are they sent in to express their personal views. Their role is to bring up and defend the positions of their union's own general assembly and abstain from casting a vote if they don't have one on a particular proposal. As a result, only motions which have the support of a majority of local general assemblies can pass.

As in local unions, the role of elected members of ASSE (CLASSE) is to implement the decisions of the congress.

In the two years leading up to the strike, local unions would hold about three or four general assemblies per semester, while ASSE (CLASSE) held no more than one or two congresses per semester. When the strike began, however, that rhythm was accelerated with local unions holding at least one general assembly per week and congresses also happening on a weekly basis, during weekends.

Frequent assemblies and congresses meant that decisions made at the provincial level would echo as much as possible those made at the grassroots level.

As in local unions, important internal policies and mechanisms are in place to foster a culture of horizontality in which no individual or group holds higher status or symbolic power over others. The idea is to minimize the distance between those who have an official function (staff and elected members) and the rank and file.

Examples of these policies include:

- No special speaking priority in meetings for staff or elected members;
- No special seating (ie. up front) for staff or elected members in general assemblies and congresses and they do not facilitate these meetings;
- No salary or special scholarships for elected members;
- Number of staff is kept to a minimum;
- Stipends are available to whoever is taking on tasks;
- No special/corporate clothing, name-tags or jewelry for staff and elected members and no personalized business cards;
- No luxury furniture in union offices (TVs, leather couches, etc.);
- Non-hierarchical labels for elective functions: no presidents, vice-presidents, directors, chairmen, etc.;
- Undefined member limits for most elected committees, eliminating competition for positions.

When union officials aren't a class apart, when they get the same treatment as everyone else, and when union orientations arise from general assemblies, participation increases as students, having been able to contribute in a meaningful way, are naturally drawn into the process of implementing collective decisions. Additionally, open structures with unelected participants such as "mobilization committees" are key to channeling motivation and enthusiasm towards implementing general assembly resolutions and concrete organizing.

In a few words, a *mobilization committee* is an informal structure that gathers anyone willing to participate in a political campaign on campus. It often works in concert with the student union, which gives it a budget and some independence allowing it to take political initiatives. The mobilization committee's meetings typically involve the integration of new members, mobilization planning (ie. making flyers, classroom visits, poster, etc.) and dispatching tasks. Those meetings are more informal than general assemblies, but are also guided by the ideas of horizontal organizing. It's customary that elected union officials make themselves inconspicuous in those meetings, the idea being to share information and involve everyone willing to help on an equal basis.

The combination of direct democracy and escalation of tactics helped us build robust internal legitimacy: democratic decision-making and progressive involvement contribute a lot towards the notion that the union really embodies the will of the majority. As a

result, decisions made in general assemblies, even though they might not be backed by law, are widely respected by students.

The strike itself is perhaps the best example. In Quebec, student strikes have no legal basis whatsoever. Furthermore, enforcing the strike using picket lines and blockades of buildings is illegal. But unions' internal legitimacy is so strong that even while students know that the strike isn't explicitly lawful, picket lines are respected, even by students who oppose the strike.

That's important, because it means student strikes are possible anywhere. It also means that we don't have to wait for the state or universities to recognize our unions, our general assemblies and our democratic decisions. Autonomous organization allows us to build a level of internal legitimacy so strong that it can override laws and other efforts to silence us.

## Chronicle of the 2012 Strike

### Lead-up

In 2010 and 2011, several months before the strike, student unions were very active. They were encouraged to hold general assemblies to discuss the tuition hike and to take a position. Even though it was clear from the beginning that nothing less than an unlimited general strike would have any chance of effectively blocking the hike, many protests and actions were organized as part of an escalation of tactics.

On December 6th 2010, students protested against a government “consultation” of education sector groups (students, labor unions, administrations, etc.) about the tuition hike which was obviously skewed in favor of the policy. There was an attempt to storm the conference floor but it didn’t succeed.

In March 2011, the tuition hike was announced: it would come into effect in September 2012. Small, localized protests happened almost every day over a period of two weeks following the announcement. On the 20th, a meeting of the youth wing of the Liberal party (one of the groups pushing for the tuition hike) was disrupted. An occupation was organized with over 100 students in a finance ministry building on the 24th. On the 31st, student unions stage a one-day strike with a 3000-strong protest and an occupation of the offices of the university administrator’s lobby (also one of the groups pushing for the tuition hike).

Overall, the plan of action was simple: get people on board, launch a massive information campaign, stage a one-day general strike with a big demo and then put out a formal call for an unlimited general strike.

In 2010 and 2011, we focused on smaller-scale protests, training camps and other events with the objective of involving as many students as possible in their student union and in the committees formed around ASSE. By the end of 2011, not only were ASSE’s committees packed, but cores of activists had gathered around many student unions.

In September 2011, we launched a massive information campaign on campuses under the slogan “Stop the hike”<sup>4</sup>. All kinds of material was put out during that period: flyers, leaflets, posters, a website, video clips, research papers, etc. The goal was to get as much of this material into the hands of students as possible and get them thinking and talking about the upcoming tuition hike.

A one-day general strike was planned for November 10th, with a big rally in Montreal. For weeks, the date was stressed as a vital step in the campaign and as a means of building pressure against the government. On many campuses, that strike vote was framed as an ultimatum: a negative response from the government after that day would

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<sup>4</sup> [“Bloquons la hausse” in French](#)

automatically trigger formal organizing efforts towards an unlimited general strike. In other words, even though talk of an unlimited general strike was widespread among activists at that moment, the November rally was considered as a kind of stepping-stone.

With 200,000 students on strike that day and 30,000 marching in Montreal, November 10th was a resounding success. Never before had so many student unions simultaneously gone on a one-day strike; expectations were blown away.

The rally also led to the very first media coverage of the student campaign to block the hike. Immediately, the government responded with its own pro-hike media campaign. A dedicated website along with radio ads promoted the hike as being essential to maintaining a quality education and claimed the lie that the hike, along with modest increases in student financial aid, wouldn't hurt accessibility. This government reaction generated lots of anger among students : a storm was brewing.

As the threat of a student strike began to materialize, several opportunist groups in the mainstream left lent official support to the student movement. Chief among them was the Parti Québécois<sup>5</sup>, which declared its opposition to the tuition hike and promised to abolish it if elected. As the party foresaw a possible student strike on the horizon, it sought to score political points with this move, even though ideologically-speaking, the party wasn't opposed to tuition hikes in general, as its vote in favor of the first wave of tuition hikes in 2007 very clearly showed. Big labor federations also extended public support at this moment.

## Strategic planning

During December 2011, we drew up plans for how we would start the unlimited general strike based on the experience of the 2005 strike. To ensure success, the launch of the strike was thought out as a succession of three "waves".

In the first wave, the most active and radical student unions would hold their strike general assemblies and votes before all other student unions. The motions put to a vote included a conditional component, whereas the strike would only become effective as soon as a total of seven student unions representing at least 20,000 students would adopt similar motions. Right on the heels of this first wave, a second wave consisting mainly of progressive and well-established student unions would hold their own general assemblies. Lastly, weaker student unions with fewer activists or with unconvinced student bodies would try to join the strike in a third wave.

Starting the strike in such a progressive fashion provides some key advantages. First, it allows activists to focus their efforts on fewer student unions at a time. Since the hardest part of the strike is to get it going, this is a major advantage. Once the ball is rolling, energies can be focused on other unions which aren't on strike. Secondly, on campuses

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<sup>5</sup> [The Parti Québécois is a centrist, mainstream political party most widely known for its position in favor of Quebec separatism.](#)

where the strike is effective, many students suddenly have much more free time which can be invested in mobilizing the student bodies of other campuses. And thirdly, a certain “mass effect” is created as soon as a critical number of students are on unlimited strike. As information starts trickling through media outlets, as journalists turn their attention to student organizing, and striking students discuss the issues with their friends, the strike can quickly snowball into a large and powerful movement.

In order to harness these benefits, the planning of the strike’s launch calendar needed to be centralized. Unions who planned to join the strike would consult with the provincial executive in order to work out an appropriate date for a strike general assembly. As the beginning of any such strike is fragile, failed votes in the first days and weeks can undermine morale and hurt the chances of launching the strike. Consequently, the pressure is very high on the first few student unions who consult their membership on strike action.

At this point, we also drafted our strategy for the strike itself, based on past experiences. Here’s how we thought it would play out, more or less:

- The strike would begin in mid-February and grow in numbers until mid-March
- Our goal was for 100 000 students to be on strike at that time;
- The government would maneuver to isolate CLASSE as a “radical faction” and negotiate with FECQ and FEUQ behind closed doors
- These negotiations would happen around mid-March;
- The FECQ and FEUQ would capitalize on a one-week strike strategy in March culminating with a big unitary student demonstration on the 22nd;
- After this show of force they would cut a flimsy deal with the government, near the first week of April as the academic semester started becoming threatened;
- Our goal was to shoot down this agreement in general assemblies and convince our fellow students to press on
- If the movement maintained its strength for one or two weeks after that, we thought the government would make bigger concessions to end the strike and avoid a disaster with semesters

In short, according to our best hopes, the strike would last between 6 to 9 weeks.

## Launch

The weeks before the strike were incredibly hectic. As province-wide flyer squads were organized, every available effort was put into mobilizing students in anticipation of the first strike votes. Often from 8 AM to 6 PM, activists were on campuses having conversations with students about the upcoming vote, their union, general assemblies and related topics. Each conversation would typically take about 5 to 10 minutes and focus on addressing common misconceptions about the tuition hike and the strike itself.

As the first general assemblies took place, the overwhelmingly positive results quickly pushed us over the tipping point of 20,000 students with a strike mandate. By February 9th, most general assemblies in the first wave had voted in favor of striking. On Monday, February 13th (a week before it was anticipated), the unlimited general strike was launched.

Up until March 7th, the rhythm of the strike was rather typical: more and more student unions holding votes on the strike, strike committees getting organized on campuses, and students joining flying mobilization teams to go around the province and help spread the strike to other student unions.

On March 5th, we reached 125,000 students on strike, which was much faster than expected. But although the strike itself was growing substantially and one or two big rallies were happening every week, there were still very few direct actions aimed at disrupting business as usual. At the same time, the leaders of FECQ and FEUQ were meeting the press and -- almost apologetically -- promising to put their striking students on voluntary community work...<sup>6</sup>

A turning point was reached on March 7th, when over a thousand students surrounded and blockaded the *Loto-Québec*<sup>7</sup> building in downtown Montreal, and nearly two hundred stormed the ground floor and forced a shutdown. While the event was impressive in its number of participants, it remained entirely nonviolent: no windows broken, no rocks thrown around, etc. The mere presence of protesters was sufficient to significantly disrupt the routine of this government institution.

For the striking students occupying the building and protesting outside, the action was entirely legitimate and warranted by the goal to block the tuition hike. When people were asked to leave, no one moved... until riot police started moving in on students with batons blazing. During this brutal attempt to disperse the crowd and clear out the building, pepper spray was used profusely and flashbang grenades were thrown into the lot, severely injuring one student and causing him to lose an eye.

As a first encounter with riot police and the violence of the state, the episode was rich in lessons for the students participating, the vast majority obviously having had little previous experience in facing all-out repression. Encountering the police force's insults, abuse and brutality opened the eyes of many who held the belief that officers always acted reasonably and in good faith. Not only did the event strengthen our resolve to continue the struggle, but students were now much more distrustful of police and willing to consider self-defence tactics during demonstrations and direct actions. Furthermore, the next day, public statements by several business leaders and city officials pressing the government to sit down and negotiate with students gave credibility to the argument that direct action gets the goods.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.pieuvre.ca/2012/03/05/greve-benevolat/>

<sup>7</sup> [Loto-Québec is the state-owned lottery corporation in Quebec.](#)

## Direct action

At this point, it's important to clarify the concept of *direct action* in the context of the strike.

In essence, direct action is about students themselves being the main actors of their struggle, as opposed to representatives. As such, it's the counterpart to the direct democracy of student unions. Direct action is also about refusing mediation of the conflict by groups or individuals who often empower themselves at the expense of those on whose behalf they claim to speak, forcing them, explicitly or not, into roles of mere spectators. The “acceptable” political channels such as mass media and closed-door dialogue under the guise of “solution-building” are always primarily aimed at the pacification of conflicts and are thus incompatible with direct action. The aim is to build the struggle outside, and often in opposition to, the official political process.

Although direct action is never bounded by the limits of legality, we must reject the notion that direct action necessarily involves property destruction or violence against individuals. Those who insist on this aspect misunderstand the philosophy of direct action; the idea isn't to replace politicians with a radical fringe. On the contrary, direct actions must strive to be, as much as possible, mass actions. Within the student movement, this can only arise when those with the initiative of direct actions are in relationship with general assemblies and take cues from them about the appropriate tactics to deploy.

While the strike owed much to CLASSE as a formal, centralised organization, the movement's strength--its ability to disrupt business as usual--also derived from autonomy and decentralisation, without which direct action can't exist. Individuals or groups could lead initiatives outside the union structures without systematically being labelled as nefarious splinter groups. As long as they were not isolated from student assemblies, and discussion about strategy and tactics was encouraged, they could empower each other instead of viewing one another with constant suspicion.

On the ground, CLASSE itself mostly organized large rallies and demonstrations while direct actions such as blockades and occupations were often undertaken by affinity groups close to local student unions. Would-be participants could consult an open calendar on CLASSE's website where most of the upcoming actions were recorded. These were divided into three categories based on which type of group was behind each action: CLASSE, local student unions or individuals.

The nature of autonomous actions varied quite a bit and while their timings, targets or means weren't always strategic, CLASSE's role was not to police nor condemn them. This was most important as spokespersons interviewed by the media were often invited – and sometimes pressed – to condemn “violent” or “unacceptable” actions by students such as blocking roads. Internally, they were expected maintain a distance by stating that a particular action wasn't organized by CLASSE, but otherwise, to put it in context and justify its legitimacy.

Of course, an important consequence of encouraging direct action is the repression that often follows. The movement dealt with this in a variety of ways. To better prepare students, workshops on safety in demonstrations, legal defence and security culture were organised on campuses. To deal with arrests and charges, a legal committee comprised of fully accredited lawyers and helpers (mostly law students) was put together and available on-call 24/7. And to ensure the long-term legal defence of the accused, efforts were put into building a fund through fundraising events and solicitation of labor unions and other groups. All these resources were made available by CLASSE to anyone who participated in any action in support of the strike, regardless of their status as a student or affiliation to any particular student union.<sup>8</sup>

## Expansion

After March 7th, direct actions became more frequent and yet despite widespread condemnation of the violent tactics which resulted in a young man losing an eye, the police response was increasingly vicious. Confrontations became more common.

Then came March 15th, the International Day Against Police Brutality. For the last ten years or so, a few hundred would take to the streets in Montreal annually on that date to highlight the problem of police brutality. That year, this demonstration was much bigger than ever before. As expected, the march was only tolerated for a very short time until riot squads moved in and attacked the crowd. Scenes of chaos across downtown were witnessed as the squads attempted to chase down groups of protesters who refused to disperse and, in some cases, vandalised police cruisers which occupied almost every street corner.

As the big student rally planned for March 22nd approached, the government's response to the strike was more defiant than we had expected. For weeks it consistently rejected growing calls for negotiation with student groups, while at the same time reiterating *ad nauseam* its justifications for the tuition hike.

On the other hand, the momentum for the strike vastly surpassed our expectations. By mid-March more than 200,000 student were on strike, much higher than we hoped to reach during the entire length of the campaign. We realised then, almost in disbelief, that we were on track to shatter the record of the largest student strike in the history of the province.

Over 300,000 students were on strike on March 22nd, which is about 75% of all CEGEP (college) and university students in Quebec. Buses converged from all corners of the province into Montreal for the rally, which was in the making for months. It's estimated that 200,000 people participated, easily making it the biggest protest ever seen in the province.

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<sup>8</sup> [In contrast, FECQ and FEUQ offered legal support through a contracted law firm, but only to its own members.](#)

This huge protest and the sheer number of students on strike, combined with the fact that more and more students were drawn into organising and participating in direct actions, made us recognize that we had more leverage than ever over the government.

Still, faced with an unequivocal adversary, we still had to keep building up the pressure. After the protest on the 22nd and lots of discussion in general assemblies, CLASSE called on students to organise a “week of economic disruption”. Autonomous student groups massively answered the call, and for the following weeks, up to three major direct actions were happening every day. Ministry buildings, office towers, government institutions, highways and even the Port of Montreal became the targets of blockades and actions of disruption. As autonomous initiatives multiplied, some buildings like the Ministry of Education in Montreal were even targeted repeatedly.

## Injunctions

At the beginning of April, with the strike going strong for a seventh week, a right-wing minority opposing the strike started organizing and making itself heard. Without much surprise, we learned early on that some of these students had links with the Liberal party.

Because they knew they couldn't convince general assemblies to end the strike, they turned to the courts to obtain injunctions allowing them to resume their classes. Though CLASSE fought them on legal grounds, judges granted them one after the other, mainly on the grounds that a student strike had no legal basis and that the continued picketing of campuses would bring these students immediate and irreparable harm. Since these injunctions were only granted on an individual basis, it took a lot of time, money and effort for opponents of the strike to obtain them. Nonetheless, a month later, over 100 injunctions were in effect across the province.

The first injunction had a shockwave effect across the movement. To all intents and purposes, it meant that a minority of (mainly wealthy, well-connected) students could get a court order to circumvent the student union's democratic decision-making, effectively transposing an eminently political issue into a legal one. Obviously, this angered a huge number of students, including those who were opposed to the strike but considered the general assemblies' decisions legitimate. The movement's internal legitimacy was so strong that it easily superseded the legitimacy of the justice system which had revealed its conservative and reactionary nature.

Despite the threat of arrest and imprisonment<sup>9</sup>, the injunctions were met with massive challenges on all campuses where they came into effect. In the case of the very first individual who had obtained one, students formed a huge “corridor of shame” leading to the anthropology class where the teacher waited to give an open-door lecture on “conflict management”! Other campuses were picketed by large groups of masked students

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<sup>9</sup> [Failure to comply or obstruction of an injunction is punishable by up to two years in jail.](#)

prepared to face security guards and police and in yet other instances, classes resumed by such court orders were disrupted by groups of students.

Administrations responded by appealing for calm and pleading for the injunctions to be respected. Yet in most places, when faced with students determined to enforce their strike, they backed down. There was no way classes could resume in normal conditions short of triggering big confrontations on their campuses and having dozens, even hundreds of their own students arrested. Teachers, who were numerous to support the strike, were also scandalised by the injunctions and resisted demands to resume classes.

Unfortunately, some administrations did decide to test the students' resistance by ordering security guards and/or law enforcement to clear out picket lines. Where these attempts weren't quickly abandoned, situations degenerated in all-out confrontation. In a cegep north of Montreal, provincial police fired tear gas *on campus* to clear out picket lines which included parents and teachers. At *Université de Montréal*, when students learned that administrators were ordering faculty to lecture empty classes, a huge protest of nearly a thousand students rampaged on campus towards the administration building, sabotaging classroom furniture on their way. After a serious attempt to force the principal's office door using a battering ram, they too backed down.

## Negotiations

While injunctions were spreading, prompting the movement's rank-and-file to become increasingly restless, the government was steadfast in its rejection of any form of compromise or negotiation. By mid-April, the total number of students on strike was stabilizing, but in many general assemblies, the voting numbers gap between for and against the strike was shrinking. We feared that if a few major student unions stopped the strike, it could trigger a trend that would collapse the strike. In all likelihood, this is what the government was hoping for.

However, at the same time, the movement was radicalizing itself. Several factors were at play, notably the absence of any dialogue on the part of authorities for such a long time after the beginning of the strike. The government was at pains to maintain its image of being "of the people and for the people" rather than "of the rich and for their businesses".

Actions in the streets grew more brazen and defiance of police and riot squads was increasingly widespread. In parallel, assemblies took bold steps to signify their intention to persevere by deciding to suspend their regular continuation votes and commit to only reconsider the strike if and when the government made an offer. This trend of "eternal strikes", as they became known, started in a single cegep known for its radical politics but quickly spread across the strike movement. Within a few weeks, over 100,000 students were on this type of strike.

Finally, on April 15, the education minister announced it was ready to engage in talks with the students union leaders, but on one condition: that they all publicly condemn violence. FECQ and FEUQ obliged all too happily, yet CLASSE, invoking the need to

first consult its general assemblies, didn't follow suit. As such, the government hoped to isolate CLASSE under the pretext that it could never negotiate with apologists of violence and thus hold negotiations with only the moderate federations at the bargaining table.

This plan was frustrated when FEUQ announced its refusal to participate in any negotiations from which CLASSE would be excluded. This unprecedented show of basic solidarity from an organisation most previously known for its contempt of ASSÉ could be explained by two main reasons. First, because at this point the strike movement was associated with CLASSE more than any other organization, through the mainstream media as well as its grassroots mobilising efforts on campuses. FEUQ wanted to avoid making such a strongly divisive move that would have outraged masses of already angry students. Second, because it was going through an internal crisis where member unions threatened to defederate if FEUQ accepted negotiation without CLASSE. Many within the federation were keen to avoid a scenario similar to the one that played out during the 2005 general student strike.

Within CLASSE, the issue of violence was referred to general assemblies and the congress. The next week, the congress adopted a resolution condemning the "deliberate violence against individuals unless in legitimate defense". Student unions refused to condemn radical tactics and direct actions such as blockades and occupations, which is what the government was seeking by using the blanket word of violence. Obviously, the right-wing accused CLASSE of wordplay, and insisted that an organisation condoning vandalism and destruction should be dealt with through law enforcement and not politics. In the end however, the move was largely perceived as an act of good faith and the education minister reluctantly agreed to convene all three student groups to negotiations.

First meetings between the two parties were held on April 23 and 24. While FEUQ and CLASSE were represented by each federation's president, CLASSE sent the members of its negotiations committee elected explicitly to this function. Ostensibly, the government's strategy was undermined by the presence of CLASSE delegates. In typical negotiation scenarios such as with unions for example, representatives are free to put forward alternative proposals and strike agreements that fall short of the demands or goals of the movement. Most often, this mediation role played by the movement's leadership can make conflicts shorter, but at the expense of helping to push through scant offers against the membership's will. The CLASSE negotiations committee had no such mandate, however. It could neither propose a compromise to the government nor recommend any offer to students: its function was strictly limited to communicating the demands of general assemblies and report back with the government's offers.

Shortly after breaking off negotiations, the government made a public offer through a media statement. To say it fell short of reversing the tuition hike is an understatement. The offer was so pathetic that the very same evening, a spontaneous night demonstration of several thousand marched against it, chanting "it's not an offer, it's an insult, our answer: demonstrations every night until victory!" Predictably, in the following days, the offer was massively rejected by general assemblies.

## The Maple Spring

As politicians and media pundits emphasised an imagined dichotomy between “honest taxpayers” and “egoist students”, the movement sought to express solidarity with struggles outside the scope of the education system. Through its public appearances, CLASSE began to more explicitly frame the conflict as part of a broader struggle against neoliberalism. The slogan “The students are on strike, but the people are in struggle” was used on banners and publications and the expression “Maple Spring”, a play on words tying our struggle to the “Arab Spring”, came into use. Although several attempts were made to break the limits of the student strike and generalize the struggle, for example by organizing joint demonstrations with workers on strike, this proved very difficult.

The unfolding of two events, which occurred at the end of April seemed to reveal some success, however. The first was a government convention to promote *Plan Nord*, a plan to exploit natural resources in northern Quebec, and the second was the Earth Day rally. While unconnected to the student strike, the context in which they took place produced unexpected effects.

On April 20th, CLASSE organized a demonstration to disrupt the *Plan Nord* convention in Montreal. Though the government plan was heavily criticized by ecologist and native groups, CLASSE’s primary intent wasn’t an ecological one. Rather, it was an opportunity for action, like many others before it, aimed at disrupting business as usual and putting more pressure on the government. After entering the convention building, a few dozen demonstrators were confronted by riot police guarding the entrance to the hall and were violently evicted. As they rejoined other demonstrators outside, comprised mainly of students, worker’s unions, and native groups, the police attacked the crowd with tear gas. For the next few hours, police and protesters battled it out on the usually dull downtown streets. The prime minister was embarrassed and the protests raised awareness about *Plan Nord*, which suddenly became a controversial issue for students. In a way, CLASSE became environmentalist by association.

Two days later, on April 22nd, an Earth Day march took place, also in Montreal. It’s estimated that over 200,000 thousand people took part, and judging from the chants and placards, a huge number of students also participated. Several previously isolated issues like the environment, native rights and the right to education seemed to converge and all become part of the movement.

In many ways, the 2012 student strike was breaking new ground. All the government’s attempts to contain or break the strike proved ineffective: settlement offers, playing student unions against one another, injunctions, heavy-handed policing, etc. As massive nightly demonstrations happening on a daily basis gathered thousands, tens of thousands even, police were unable to keep order on the streets. The usual dispersal tactics were incapable of ending these rowdy protests, as people kept on regrouping even as riot squads charged the dense crowds. Provincial police in riot gear and surveillance helicopters were brought in and became a common sight in Montreal for days. The government appeared to be in total loss of control in the face of the movement.

## The Battle of Victoriaville

The climate of social crisis reached a climax on May 4th. A coalition of community groups, environmentalists, and labor unions bussed in protesters from across the province to Victoriaville, a small, quiet town east of Montreal, where the ruling Liberal party was holding its annual convention. Upon reaching the hotel hosting the convention, the crowd of about 3000-strong quickly overwhelmed the small barriers intended to keep everyone clear of the hotel grounds. As people approached the windows and entrances, tensions flared and riot police moved in to push the protest back using massive amounts of tear gas and plastic bullets. This continued for hours in the area around the hotel, with a number of protesters attempting to slow down the advance of police lines by throwing back rocks and tear gas canisters. Students and their allies suffered some of the worst injuries of the entire student strike during this confrontation, mainly owing to the provincial police's extensive and dangerous use of plastic bullets, also known as "plastic baton rounds". Several buses on the return trip were also intercepted by law enforcement and searched.

Although the news of chaos and confrontation were not welcomed in the media or the general public, the government was widely regarded as the party responsible for these events. The prime minister appeared inept to deal with the conflict.

The next day, a new round of negotiations were announced. This time, labor leaders were brought in as mediators, to "facilitate" the discussions between the government and student negotiators. Meetings went on uninterrupted for nearly 24 hours, leaving little time for students to rest and the CLASSE negotiations committee to confer. Labor leaders, for their part, with their paternalistic attitude towards students and their urging them to get along and sign an agreement, did not show themselves to be allies of the movement.

Finally, a tentative agreement was signed. Irrespective of the settlement terms it offered, it proved highly controversial among CLASSE activists: the document contained provisions that the negotiations committee had no authority to accept, such as a commitment not to organize any demonstration linked to the agreement. The CLASSE negotiations committee cited the role of labor leaders, the dynamics of the meetings, and exhaustion as reasons for the error and an apology was made.

Nonetheless, the government, confident the exercise would signal the end of the strike, declared the conflict over.

## Towards bill 78

But it was badly mistaken. The agreement offered no compromise on tuition fees and instead, commissioned the creation of a review-board of sorts which would seek to uncover funds in university budgets which eventually could, possibly, be used to partially offset the tuition fee hike. General assemblies, after reviewing the content of the proposal along with the flawed process that produced it, unanimously rejected it. The government was, in a way, stuck between a rock and a hard place.

The strike showed some signs of wavering, but over 150,000 students were still on strike and seemed determined to do what was necessary and follow the struggle through to the end. The mood in assemblies was resolved: the only acceptable proposal was to scrap the tuition hike. After so many weeks of protesting and enduring repression, the stakes were higher than ever.

On the other hand, the government didn't appear to be giving up either. It still had support among the public, so by conceding or compromising it risked losing a huge amount of credibility. If we take into account the global context, with France, England, Greece, Chile as examples, in the past years and months uprisings there gradually faded without making any significant headway, while governments held their ground. It's likely that Quebec didn't want to set a precedent.

As special legislation designed to break the strike was rumored to be in the works, the education minister resigned, probably because she opposed it. But the resignation of the minister who had been the face of the state's intransigence was a bittersweet victory. A few days later, the Liberal Party introduced Bill 78 in parliament. The emergency law, officially titled "An act to enable students to receive instruction from the postsecondary institutions they attend", was adopted in haste after an hours-long marathon session.

The law immediately suspended the semester of every institution on strike, postponing the remaining classes until August. It introduced heavy fines for any individual, union or organization enforcing a student strike from that moment forward. It also restricted protests across the province by declaring illegal any gathering of 50 persons or more unless the event's date, time, itinerary and other details are pre-approved by police. Anyone advocating or urging defiance of this law could also be subject to stiff penalties.

## May 22nd and the "casseroles"

The law's severity came as a big shock for striking students and supporters of the strike. Few of us had predicted such harsh, unprecedented measures. It even prompted a number of groups outside the movement such as the Quebec Human Rights Commission and the Bar of Quebec to condemn the legislation on the grounds that it violated fundamental charter rights.

But like other attempts to beat the movement into submission, the law failed to break the momentum of the strike. The night of the law's adoption, a huge riot broke out in downtown Montreal, with several improvised barricades set on fire. Subsequent nightly demonstrations saw renewed fierceness and vitality. Instead, it caused anti-government outrage to spill over, of which the May 22nd rally was a testament.

In a press conference two days before the rally, CLASSE publicly announced that it wouldn't provide the itinerary of the march to police<sup>10</sup> in overt defiance of the emergency law and calling for acts of civil disobedience against it. While FECQ and FEUQ

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<sup>10</sup> [Previously, ASSÉ/CLASSE never gave its itineraries to police.](#)

promised to challenge the law in the courts, the CLASSE student delegates, meeting in a congress just days before, agreed to face it head-on, in the streets, even if it brought with it the possibility of arrests of its officials or crippling fines. The entire organisation was put on the line: if the government wants to destroy CLASSE, better to go down in flames than submit.

The May 22nd rally, in which more than 200,000 took part, was labelled the largest act of civil disobedience in the history of Quebec. Although it was illegal in regards to the emergency law, the Montreal police spokesperson declared that the march would be tolerated as long as no criminal acts or misdemeanors were committed. Aside from a smaller break-away group that targeted a few banks and storefronts along their own route, the main demonstration remained entirely non-violent.

The event also highlighted the obsessively law-abiding strategies of the leaderships of the FECQ, FEUQ and labor unions. While the context cried out for action against the new emergency law, they all acted separately from CLASSE and provided a route to police in advance (as they always did before, anyway) and led their own groups away from the “illegal” main protest. With only a few hundred following in the footsteps of these usually well-organized and disciplined processions, the initiative was an obvious failure. The events of the following days would demonstrate: masses of people were ready and willing to defy the emergency law on the streets.

This, of course, was a most exciting development. Up until then, the state, with its vast security apparatus, had again proven its ability to endure bunches of activists symbolically attacking property and confronting riot police. But against vast numbers of people refusing to acknowledge the law-making authority of the state, and prepared to take action, albeit peacefully, its options were likely more limited. In our view, the government was pushed into an even trickier situation, with seemingly shifting odds.

Its problem of legitimacy worsened in the following days and weeks with what became known as the “casserole movement”. The original idea, launched as a call-out on social media, was for people to bang pots and pans on their front door every day at 8PM, for twenty minutes, as a sign of opposition to bill 78. Early on, people began occupying sidewalks, parks and street corners with these very loud and noisy casserole rallies, eventually turning into improvised and illegal marches on neighborhood streets. On every street, upon hearing the rally passing in front, residents would come out and bang their pots and pans in concert with the protesters. These marches became so prevalent across the city that the mayor publicly asked for people not to take part in them, and instead stay in their homes to bang pots and pans. Of course, the demand went unheeded.

It was hard to predict the police’s reaction to these protests, but it soon became clear that it wouldn’t enforce the protest-restricting aspect of bill 78: not only would this mean arresting thousands of people in many different points in the city, with all that would entail, but aside from the police’s great difficulty in directing and routing these marches, they were mostly peaceful and not big a threat to public order.

In Montreal, these small and numerous neighborhood protests often continued late into the evening. They would merge together and eventually converge into nightly 9PM rallies in the downtown area, forming a single gigantic and often deafening demonstration. While the movement was centered in Montreal, suburbs and small towns also saw their own pots and pans rallies, with several similar events also appearing in cities across Canada and the US.

This period also marked the birth of several autonomous neighborhood assemblies in Montreal, which aimed to consolidate the struggle outside of campuses by tapping into the enthusiasm of the pots and pans movement and the community it created among residents. Although there was little coordination between the neighborhood assemblies themselves, many set out to work on related matters such as mobilising in favor of a “social strike”, providing support for the arrestees of the strike and organising popular education and teach-ins.

## Summer

Meanwhile, the official suspension of the semester in the 14 CEGEPS and 11 universities still on strike imposed a lull in the struggle. In a sense, the government was locking-out student unions from campuses for the summer, in order to “ease off tensions”, as officials put it. Having no strike renewal votes to organise, most local unions stopped organising general assemblies, while those which maintained them saw numbers of student participation plummet.

Long months of constant struggle and repression also began to bear heavily. With the advent of the summer months, large portions of students turned their attention to holidays or temp work. The severe requirements of modern life, which, for many of us, means having to work during the holiday season to pay for food and housing, soon caught up. Networks of relief and mutual aid, which could perhaps have helped maintain the strike community, were for the most part nonexistent until after the strike was over.

Nevertheless, many students still considered themselves as being on strike and took part in various protests during the summer. Notably, efforts to disrupt events surrounding the Formula-1 racing event in Montreal, while spearheaded by anti-capitalist groups, became linked with the student struggle as one local student union’s assembly decided to organise protests aimed at cancelling the race altogether. With security reinforced and repression hitting hard on the weekend’s rallies, these efforts were largely unsuccessful.

As the weeks passed by, while the pots and pans protests had nearly completely faded away, rumors of elections grew.

## Elections

On August 1st, the ruling Liberal party dissolved the government and launched an early election campaign, barely two weeks before the semesters starting up again for striking students. Betting that the strike was over and that students would choose to return to class,

the party hoped to win back some support by arguing that Bill 78 had effectively brought back peace and order on campuses. The Parti Quebecois, on the other hand, which led the polls from the first day of the campaign, promised to cancel the tuition hike and repeal Bill 78. Many students interpreted this as victory being close at hand.

FECQ and FEUQ launched campaigns to boost youth participation in the elections and work against the Liberal party's campaign. For them, the strike was already over. FECQ's former-president-turned-PQ-candidate called for an "electoral truce" -- a call echoed by many in the Left -- in which student unions would suspend the strike to give the new government a chance. Furthermore, FECQ's new president told media that continuing the strike would be "academically disastrous" for students.

CLASSE, in its case, mostly stayed away from playing a part in electoral politics, sticking to a slogan broadly condemning neoliberalism, ambiguously calling for voting against the three main more-or-less right-wing parties. Instead, it hammered the message that the strike was not over and the assemblies were the ones deciding if the strike was over or not. Among the student groups and activists in local unions, opinions were divided on the option of continuing the strike. Some thought that striking during an election made no sense (the government being dissolved) and that if the PQ wasn't elected or if it reneged on its promises, the strike could be revived after elections.

In the week of August 13th, virtually all local student unions voted down the strike by large majorities. Despite passionate defenses of the strike and little anti-strike arguments at the assemblies themselves, the strike collapsed.

Arguably, most students didn't realize what more could be gained by continuing the strike that the PQ's probable election victory couldn't bring. They weren't ready to risk what was left of their semester, *just in case* the PQ didn't win at the polls.

The PQ went on to win, by a small margin, the elections held on September 4th. It ensured this outcome by federating the Left and nationalist votes on a platform which included, apart from the promise aimed at ending the student conflict, increasing taxes of the the richest, abolishing a regressive health tax and implementing several environmentally-friendly policies. On September 19th, a decree officially abolished the tuition hike.

## Conclusion

The 2012 Quebec student strike has demonstrated yet again the potential and power of democratic and combative movements. Unions and social movements that seek inspiration from the strike need to start thinking about moving towards direct democracy and focus not just on building appropriate formal structures, but also on fostering a culture of horizontalism. Just as importantly, they must do away with any illusions they might still have about dialogue and collaboration with state institutions. Any leverage students had against the government, they got by disrupting business as usual through paralyzing campuses with the strike and direct action.

Above all, the strike could not have begun or survived without the sustained engagement and dedication of students who have continued to organise even through defeat and deception. Movement-building is a task that needs to be conceived over the long term, with failures anticipated along the way.

We must also warn the reader who might be tempted to think, after reading this, that CLASSE (ASSE) was the perfect embodiment of the ideals and principles we have sought to highlight - it was not. Whatever the perspective, CLASSE was not the holy beacon of democracy and radicalism that it was made out to be in some quarters.

In this sense, we might be accused of glossing over the contradictions of the movement. But the aim here was to provide a toolkit, not write a full, thorough assessment of the strike. We hope, nonetheless, to be able to improve it in the future with extra material and debates.

It is perhaps fitting, then, to end this endeavor by touching on such a debate. The outcome of the strike seems to have comforted some in their view that a parliamentary party should be part of any strategy aimed at profound, widespread social change.

Yet, since being elected and abolishing the tuition hike and Bill 78, the PQ has reneged on many of its progressive proposals. It has implemented an austerity budget complete with cuts in social programs, including in the education sector. Furthermore, after rallying major labor unions and the two student federations at a special summit on higher education, it has reintroduced the tuition hike in a “softer” form, establishing a permanent increase of 3% per year.

The PQ is showing once again that election campaign promises are far too often the victims of ruling class realpolitik, and that left-leaning or leftist parties cannot be trusted with the outcomes of our struggles. Our stance is that any electable political party, once in power, would follow the elite's political program, regardless of the radical origins of its own program.

Instead, we propose that we should rely on nothing but ourselves, building our own capacities to resist austerity and institutionalise change through self-organisation.

## 5 - Further readings

### Building local student unions

When building a student union, there are important decisions to make about its structure that will determine the dynamics of the union. First of all, you need to decide which students are going to be members. Will the union include all the students of the university? Only students of a single "school"? Only students of a single department? Students of several selected departments? Or students of a single program?

In order to decide that, the most important factors to consider are based on the efficiency of the newly created union to enforce a strike. In general, a union should not comprise much more than 10,000 students. Over that number, it becomes difficult to hold general assemblies and strikes are difficult to enforce. If the campus is bigger than that, then you may prefer building the union on smaller units. This can cause problems if your union is created in such ways that in a lot of classes you have members and non-members mixed together, because non-members will get angry for not being able to vote on strike GA's that affect their classes. For example, if the sociology and history department are closely tied together and have classes in common, then it might be a good idea to create a union that at least includes both departments.

Another factor to take into consideration is the proximity of the student union with its members. A large union can seem out of reach and out of control to students. Again, it's a good idea to keep the student union size under a few thousands. The last factor to consider is the stability of the student union over time. A small union can be very democratic and can easily go on strike, but it might lack stability over long periods of time. During downtimes, the number of activists willing to run the union shrinks. As the number of activists in a single union is somewhat proportional to its total number of members, a small union can become completely inactive and disappear during such periods. Gathering a few hundred students (maybe at least 500) is a good idea to keep a critical mass that will guarantee some stability.

In some higher education systems, students do not need to choose a major before their third year - this might be challenging on the issue of dividing clearly student unions inside a campus. To build a student union base on the departmental level, it might be necessary to define the membership as "all students with at least one class of the X department" instead of "all students who are X majors". But even if that is possible, it will be hard to define how to divide courses of the general education.

In Quebec, we have strict rules imposed by universities on the structures that student unions can have. But if you plan to create student unions outside of official laws, then you don't have that problem and you can freely configure the best department mixes for your union.

Also, we must go through an accreditation process that includes a referendum to create a union. Basically, a majority of the body of students that are going to be represented by the new union needs to vote in favor of the accreditation. If no law requires such process, then you are free to create the union in any other way. However, it might be a very good idea to self-impose that kind of process in order to build the legitimacy of the union. The union's chances of success are much stronger if a high percentage of students made the informed decision to support its creation. This can be done through a referendum, a general assembly or some kind of petition.

As long as you control the process of student union accreditation, you will be able to reconfigure the union's membership over time if needed. For example, if a department of linguistics was not included in a union at first and wants to join a larger union of social sciences, then a referendum can be organized in that specific department.

If you are planning to create multiple student unions on a campus, then a vast array of possibilities exist in the way those unions can work together. Here are three different models we have in Quebec:

In the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM), there is a union for each department and a union for each school. As schools have between 2000 to 5500 students, the unions based on that administrative level are pretty efficient. Unions at the departmental level are much smaller (from 50 to 1600 students). Their activism is unstable, but they are still capable of playing an important role. There is no big union for the whole university, so the coordination between the seven school-based unions is informal.

In the Université de Montréal (UdM), there are only unions at the program level or departmental level. That creates very small unions (with as little as 50 members). The biggest ones (from 600 to 1600 students) can manage to be stable over time, and even the smaller ones are able to make good strikes when important struggles are happening. But on down time, this type of student union can become inefficient. In this university, those departmental unions are federated in a campus-wide student federation. This can be efficient to have a single and strong voice before the university's administration. However, because of the instability of student unions at the departmental level, the logic of the federation is not one of direct democracy. The federation meetings are a place where the head of the campus federation can manipulate less mobilized departmental unions in order to maintain control. Left-wing student unions in return tend to coordinate their actions through informal meetings outside the federation.

In University Laval (UL), the union structure is an hybrid between these two structures. There are unions at the departmental level, at the school level and all of these are federated by a campus-wide student federation. The campus federation tends to present the same problems as at University of Montreal. A difference, though, is that unions of graduate students are separated from unions of undergraduate students. In our experience, separating grads from undergrads is usually a bad idea. When unions comprise of both, they benefit from the stability of having activists for a longer period of time.

Other ways of dividing and organizing student unions are possible. For example, if you have a small campus (under 7000), you can have a union for the whole campus with a general assembly and smaller unions at the departmental level.

## Building a statewide student union

In Quebec, statewide student unions like ASSÉ (CLASSE) are federations of local unions. Local unions are said to be affiliated with a statewide union or that they are independent if they didn't join any. In order to join a statewide union, local unions need to organize an affiliation vote and to accept the basic principles of that union.

If no local student unions exist, then building a statewide union might be premature. This does not exclude, however, statewide coordination through semi-informal meetings of what might become a statewide union. But the foundation of the statewide union will be more solid if it is based on strong local unions.

### **How is ASSÉ (CLASSE) structured and what role does it play?**

The structure of ASSÉ has been built and improved upon over the years to preserve the best balance possible between direct democracy, efficiency, local autonomy and inclusiveness. It can still be improved, but the 2012 strike proved it is quite good.

The supreme decision-making body of ASSÉ is the congress. All political debates should be discussed at the congress, but the decisions should define the main guidelines and refrain from going into unnecessarily specific details. During the congress, only student unions can vote (one vote each), but elected members of the executive and the various committees can speak.

The executive council is composed of eight members, each of which is elected for a specific function. The executive's role is to make sure the organization is doing fine and that motions voted by the congress are applied. If there is a problem or a lacuna in the organization, the executive is required to fill the gap and do the work. The executive council is not entitled (and not expected) to make important political decisions, but it can propose political motions during congresses. It is one of the only institutions that is not a student union that has this privilege.

There are eight working committees, each of which is assigned a specific and important role. There is generally no limits to the number of persons that can be elected on each committee, so some can be composed of as much as twelve members during important mobilizations. It is important to emphasize that the committee's members must be elected, and as such are accountable to the congress.

Here is a brief description of the committees:

- *Mobilization committee*

Its role is to make sure the mobilization on every campus is doing fine. If needed, this committee coordinates flying mobilization teams by sending activists from more active unions to unions in need of help.

- *Information committee*

Its role is to create province-wide information material. They are responsible for providing posters, flyers, stickers, websites and general graphic designs for ASSÉ's campaigns.

- *Newspaper committee*

Its role is to produce the newspaper of the organization. The committee usually requires the help of collaborators to write and correct the articles.

- *Women committee*

The women committee's role is to assist local student unions in the promotion of feminism, to organize feminist events and to make sure feminist issues do not become secondary inside the organization. In order to efficiently fulfill that last function, the women committee is the only working committee that can propose motions at the congress.

- *Legal committee*

This committee was created just before the strike and has since been made permanent. There can only be 5 elected members on it. Its role is to coordinate judicial defense of arrested students during actions. It makes contact with lawyers and administrates the legal fund.

- *Academic and research committee*

Its role is to produce research, analysis and documentation according to the organization's needs and campaigns.

- *Social struggles committee*

Its role is to make contacts with community organizations, labor unions and other groups involved in local struggles.

- *Media committee (during the strike only)*

This committee was created for the duration of the strike. It was composed of the secretary of communications (member of the executive council), elected spokespersons and elected press secretaries. Its role is to manage everything related to mainstream medias.

The work of committees is organized by the *Coordination Council* (CoCo). Committees, the executive council and each regional council send a delegate to the CoCo. The role of this council is to dispatch the workload between the committees according to their respective roles and to the motions adopted in congress.

*Regional councils* are semi-autonomous structures that allow student unions to organize on a regional basis. They usually take the form of more or less informal meetings that coordinate the action plan at a smaller scale than the province-wide plan of the congress. Regional councils can integrate student unions that are not affiliated with ASSÉ and they have a small budget to organize regional actions.

## How exactly do we enforce a strike?

There are many ways to enforce a strike, and they depend on the context, the union, and its internal legitimacy. First of all, in Quebec, we usually vote on the strike ahead of time. So there is a few days between the strike GA and the strike day. During that period, it is important to make mass mobilization with posters and flyers to *inform the students that a strike has been voted on democratically*. When doing so, it's also important to make sure that the flyers *talk about the strike in an affirmative way*, such as: "On X day, we will be on strike. There will be no classes." The important thing is that anti-strike students simply don't show up because they believe that classes will be canceled and that pro-strike students enforce the strike and participate in the events.

On the day of the strike, you need to have a mass of pro-strike students in order to enforce the strike. A badly enforced strike encourages anti-strike students to disrespect strike votes in the future.

So, if the strike is voted for a whole campus, the best way to enforce it is simply to make picket lines at the building door. This works well for campuses under 7000 students. If teachers are unionized, they may refuse to cross the picket lines (depending on the nature of their union's contract) and classes will be canceled. In order to prevent confrontation on the picket lines, the administration of the campus might even cancel the classes themselves.

If the strike is voted on in a specific department, then it becomes impossible to blockade the building because courses are most likely to be scattered and mixed in different buildings. Courses may need to be picketed or disturbed separately. Some student unions in Quebec prefer to make small picket lines in front of the classrooms just before the class. Usually a symbolic 2 or 3 student picket line per door is enough to prevent the teacher from entering the class. Other student unions make "strike enforcement teams" that goes from class to class to disturb them until the teacher quits.

When enforcing the strike, it's important not to be aggressive at first. Most students who will show up for their classes won't understand what's happening. Taking five minutes to explain what's happening is usually enough to convince them to leave. Consider this as an opportunity to talk to students who are generally more apathetic.

## The history of the Quebec student movement

<http://www.anarkismo.net/article/24361>

## The case against representative democracy

Building a democratic movement isn't a matter of personal preference or organising style. You do your thing, and I'll do mine. Rather, it's a question of what's effective at fostering resistance, what's not, and what works against it. Direct democracy isn't just “an alternative” to representative democracy: both are at odds with each other. In essence, this antagonism stems from two different conceptions of unions: one as an *association* of workers or students, and the other as their *representative*. Understanding it requires a brief look at the history of the labor movement.

*A union is an association of workers banding together for a common purpose. Historically, unions emerged from the conditions of emerging capitalism. First in craft production, then amongst industrial and service workers. In the early days, unions couldn't be anything but such associations. There were no legal union rights, employers refused to recognise them and unionists faced harsh repression.*

*However, over time employers were forced to come to terms with the fact that unions were a fact of life. They began to recognise them as the representatives of the workers, to be negotiated with on their behalf in order to secure the shop floor peace and order necessary for profit-making. Thus the second function, the representative function was born. Many unionists actively fought for this, and saw the acceptance of unions as a victory.*

*As unions became accepted by capitalism, they more and more came to resemble capitalist institutions themselves, with a hierarchical structure topped by salaried bureaucrats, dedicated legal departments, and numerous other full time staff. Today, the associational and representative functions are completely intertwined. Indeed you join a union in order to be represented. But when this process first began in earnest at the dawn of the 20th century, it provoked a backlash from the more radical rank-and-file elements, a broad current known as syndicalism.*

*Historian Bob Holton writes that one of the major factors behind the British syndicalist movement was that "instead of undue repression it was increasingly agreed [by bosses and politicians] that trade union demands could be more effectively diffused by bargaining and in particular by utilising union officials as a mediating influence between labour and capital."<sup>11</sup>*

Although they differ in many ways, parallels can be drawn between the role played by these bureaucratic labor unions and by student governments or federations. In public they will present demands on behalf of their membership while in private, they will always compromise to accommodate whoever is sitting opposite, whether employer, administrator or politician.

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<sup>11</sup> <http://libcom.org/blog/thinking-about-unions-association-representation-20052011>

What makes this possible is bureaucracy, which concentrates knowledge and power in the hands of a few individuals. Through their influence, which becomes far more important than that of other members, they will get a greater say in their organisation's development and political orientation. Over time, those attracted to such privileged positions will seek to consolidate it, and by doing so will guide the entire organisation towards increasingly conservative positions. When (and if) challenged, they will often cite the need for efficiency and the dangers of risk-taking.

Avoiding bureaucratisation isn't a matter of choosing the right employee or electing the best candidate. It's not a question of trust, competence or sincerity. It's about fighting against things that have the potential of lifting fellow students or workers into a positions of relative power. The first of which is the power of representation.

### General assemblies: how to build their legitimacy

When first setting up a student union, it might not be easy to establish the supremacy of the GA as a legitimate thing. Even in Quebec where student unions are widespread and where the general assembly has been rooted in the movement's culture for decades, the participation in those assemblies is usually between 1 and 3% of all members of the student union. For example, in a college of 3000 students, there's between 30 and 100 students at regular assemblies. When a one-day strike is voted, the participation varies from 5% to 30%. The highest turnout we have seen is for unlimited strike votes, with a maximum of about 60%. Usually, smaller unions have better participation rates than bigger ones, and undergraduate students are more inclined to come than graduate students.

So, why does the participation rate seem so low? Well, it's important to understand that capitalism doesn't encourage participation in democratic structures and impedes it by very materialistic limitations. The need to work and the rhythm imposed by classes and exams are examples of that.

Low participation is a problem, but giving these limitations, we have to deal with that. From the experience we had in Quebec, so long as GA's are well publicized and open to all, and as long as the union's executive works hard to communicate the motions voted in the GA's to all members, then the process will be recognized as democratic by all students - even those who do not participate.

The real issue about setting up a student union is not so much to prove that they are representative, but to impose them as performative institutions. Most students need to understand and experience the concrete effect of GA's motions before they get really interested in it and respect it. If the union has an official representative function before the administration of the campus, then it's easy to show students that political positions taken by the GA have an effect on the campus' life. In the same fashion, if the union has a budget, then students will have an interest in the GA because the union's spending has a concrete effect.

A start-up union, however, might not have official representative powers or a significant budget. Outside of discursive construction of the GA's power, one effective way to build recognition of the GA's supremacy is through single-day strikes. A one-day strike is not a big sacrifice for students, because losing one day of class doesn't really change your formation. On the other hand, a one day strike cannot be ignored, because by enforcing it, students who came to their classes and didn't give much attention to the GA then experience the reality of their classes being canceled. They might not agree, but they learn that in order to prevent that from happening, they need to go to the GA. The next time a strike is voted, they might not try to attend their classes. The first ones might be difficult and such a way to build the GA's supremacy should not be used too soon. But in Quebec, there is such a one day strike once per semester, and this is one of the ways we reproduce, from generation to generation, that idea of the GA's an institution that has real power over campus life.