# The history of the Quebec student movement and combative unionism

**Tour notes**

Prairie Struggle

2013

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***In September 2012, shortly after the end of the largest unlimited general student strike in the history of Quebec, several class-struggle anarchist organisations in Canada along with a few local chapters of the IWW put together a cross-country tour to bring the history and experiences of the Quebec student movement to students and activists outside the province. Stopping in over a dozen cities from Toronto, Ontario to Victoria, BC, the tour brought a participant in the 2012 student strike to audiences in colleges and universities as well as union halls and various cooperatives. The article that follows is based on this conference. Special thanks to Jonathan from Zabalaza for editing help!***

The student movement in Quebec has recently written an important chapter in its history. The strike that was launched back in February 2012, against the latest hike in university tuition turned into one of the largest social movements in the province's, and perhaps even Canada's, entire histories.

Of course, one of the interesting side-effects of the events of the last few months has been that news of the strike has spread outside the province, and many students and activists have taken notice.

We're not only happy that our struggle has inspired hope among the left about the ability of social movements to fight back in this difficult context where the state and business leaders seem to reign unchallenged. But we're especially excited to witness the fact that the strike in Quebec has sparked debates across borders about charting a way forward for the student movement.

## *Birth and early history of the student movement*

The strike in Quebec didn't happen because we "just do things differently". It didn't happen because there's anything inherently specific to francophone culture. If we want to help students and activists outside Quebec learn from our movement, we need to start by addressing the fog of "Quebec exceptionalism". One way to do that is to talk history. It's an interesting starting point because right there, we've got something in common.

We're all surrounded by the history of Kings, Queens, conquests and statesmanship. The elite's history. Quebec isn't any different in that respect. History of popular movement and resistance is overlooked unless it plays into the nationalist narrative of dominant political discourse. What the Quebecois student movement does have, however, is a strong tradition of sharing the legacy of student struggles.

The birth of the student movement can be traced back to the mid-forties, not in Quebec, but in France.

At the outset of World War II, a number of students, some with links to the anti-fascist resistance, sought to give a new direction to the national student organization. The apolitical / corporatist attitudes prevalent among student groups at the time gave rise to an ambiguous relationship with the Nazi occupiers during the war and so as a response, these students took on the task of transforming the student associations of the time into real student unions, modeled after labor unions.

In 1946, the National Union of French Students, or UNEF by its French acronym, adopted a founding document: the Charter of Student Syndicalism, later known as the "Charte de Grenoble". It defines the student as a young intellectual worker with specific rights and responsibilities which ensue from this particular status.

• Article 4: "As a worker, the student has a right to work and rest in the best of conditions and in material independence, both personal and social, guaranteed by the free exercise of syndicalist rights."

• Article 7: "As an intellectual, the student has a responsibility – to seek out, propagate and defend Truth which entails sharing and advancing culture as well as drawing the meaning of history – to defend liberty against all oppression, which constitutes, for the intellectual, his most sacred mission."

In its beginnings, French student syndicalism took off around concrete issues of decolonization and the Cold War. Those who upheld apolitical student associations were confronted.

Back in Quebec, the notion of student syndicalism didn't catch on until the early sixties. At that time, student associations in the province were still apolitical and centered mostly around organizing parties and providing student services. But in 1961, students in Université de Montréal, wanting to break with that tradition, wrote their own charter of student rights and responsibilities, inspired by the Charter de Grenoble.

It was a new ideological paradigm. Students, as young intellectual workers, developed a new awareness of their role in society as a whole. They were no longer content to concern themselves with student issues. They started getting involved in worker's struggles and identifying with the working class. As a result, more and more student activists subscribed to the idea of building student unions that could not only provide services but also organize struggles and thus take an active role in shaping society.

At the time, society was going through secularization and the education system which was previously under the control of religious authorities came into the hands of the state. The old authoritarian reflexes of administrators and faculty weighed down on students' new sense of duty and responsibility. They wanted to participate in the important decisions that affected their institutions. The watchword became "student power".

Another important factor is that there was only one francophone university in Montreal, the Université de Montréal. It was elitist, expensive, and being perched up Mount Royal, was far removed from French-speaking working class boroughs in the city. Combined with the fact that the much smaller English community could count on two prestigious universities (Concordia and McGill), the sentiment of injustice would become gradually stronger.

So around this fight to democratize access to higher education, students coalesced around new, militant student unions and helped drive the development of the syndicalist tendency. Combined with a general uproar in labour, feminist and nationalist struggles in society, the student movement quickly became a force to be reckoned with.

In 1964, conscious of the need to co-ordinate the struggle, conscious of the need to build the financial and organizational tools required to maintain a permanent balance of power vis-à-vis the state, syndicalist students created the General Quebec Students' Union, or UGEQ by its French acronym.

Just a few years later, in 1968, as major students protest enflamed Europe, the upheaval crossed the Atlantic and reached Quebec. A huge wave of turmoil swept across the province and the fledgling student movement stepped in with the first unlimited general student strike in Quebec's history. Even though, in the aftermath of the strike, the government created a new public francophone university in Montreal, UQAM, along with the University of Quebec network and a brand new student financial aid program, the strike action was perceived as a failure. It was perceived as a failure simply because the result didn't come close to the huge expectations. Even

though the revolt spread across countries and started to look like revolution in a few places, the social outburst eventually died down. That sentiment, shared widely among student militants, was about to have pretty dire consequences. In the following years, many local student unions were disbanded. The UGEQ, whose membership was based in the student unions, also disappeared.

It's not that student activists were massively abandoning the struggle, but because they saw student unions as too bureaucratic. They felt unions held back student's militancy and the potential for radicalization. In disbanding student unions and reorganizing in smaller, radical political groups, they hoped to be able to build a truly revolutionary movement. Even though these critiques weren't entirely baseless, the decision to kill off student unions was made rashly and without hindsight. Unsurprisingly, the loss of the only structures and resources that could mobilize a mass movement led to a collapse of the entire student movement. As an added consequence, whole areas of student life on campus, which were built and under the control of student unions, fell into the hands of administrations. Obviously not everyone in the student movement saw all this in a positive light. It sparked a big debate in the student movement about which forms of organization were needed. Only 6 years later would the movement recover.

In 1974 the government announced plans to introduce university entry tests for francophone students. In response, a co-ordination of syndicalist student unions started organizing for a new general strike. But the Liberal government wanted to prevent any reoccurrence of the events of 1968, especially on an issue it didn't consider very important. Difficult negotiations with public sector unions made the prospect of a confrontation with students even less appealing. So it quietly retired its plans to introduce the tests, before the students got far ahead in the preparation of the strike.

Since the government's reversal was announced as temporary, students decided to press on. The feeling of empowerment from an easy victory inspired them to expand the platform of demands of the strike to include improvements to the student financial aid program. The strike got going with just a handful of student unions, but it quickly got much larger. In total, forty institutions, Cegeps and universities, participated in the strike. Four weeks into the struggle, the government announced an important set of concessions and the strike came to a close.

The success of that strike lead, the next year, in 1975, to the creation of a new, permanent, Quebec-wide, syndicalist student organization: the National Association of Quebec Students, or ANEEQ. For the next twenty years, the debate between syndicalist unions and affinity groups was put to rest. By the time of the next large student mobilization in 1978, ANEEQ eventually grew not into the main student union, but in fact the only student union and quite literally representative of the entire student movement. Most importantly, however, it remained true to its origins by actively promoting and developing rank-and–file control of student unions and combative militancy.

## *The Parti Quebecois era*

The Parti Quebecois won the elections in 1976. At the time it was definitively a progressive party. Most importantly for the student movement, its political platform promised to abolish student debt, enact free tuition and implement a "pre-salary" program. It's no surprise: lots of activists in ANEEQ, and activists that experienced and organized the strikes in 1968 and 1974, were involved

in the party. The election of the PQ to the government created a wave of enthusiasm among the entire left. Unsurprisingly, however, this enthusiasm was short-lived : the party's progressive platform was quickly shelved.

By 1978, there was a rift within ANEEQ. On the one hand, the more radical activists wanted to start organizing a general strike to try and force the PQ into implementing its own program. While on the other, you had activists loyal to the party, which defended a much more conciliatory stance towards the government, hoping to make progress on the issues by way of negotiation and dialogue.

Though both factions were about equal in numbers, the radicals, mostly Cegep students, won a crucial leadership election. Just a few days later, a single rural Cegep student union launched a general strike. Their demands: the PQ's own elections platform on accessibility to higher education. The strike gradually expanded, though not as fast as the previous one. After about three weeks, thirty Cegeps and a handful of university faculties were on strike. As the mobilization seemed to start dying down, the large UQAM student union entered the strike. Again, the government was forced into concessions during the strike. After two distinct announcements of improvements to student financial aid, the strike ended. As students started going back to class however, ANEEQ launched a campaign of occupations of MP offices. In a single day, six offices were occupied.

With the positive results from the third general strike, a renewed feeling of empowerment helped consolidate ANEEQ's radical leadership. It remained as a symbol of radicalism and mass mobilization until its very end. Advocates of conciliation and negotiation eventually formed their own, separate organizations.

In 1981, that happened when RAEU and the FAECQ were born. As brainchildren of PQ activists whose party held power, the new student unions were rapidly integrated in to the state's apparatus. Amazingly, they were also hostile to any form of mass mobilization. Their rallying cry was "the strike, never again!".

The 80's opened a gloomier chapter in the history not just of the student movement, but for the left in general. It was the era of the post-referendum, crisis inside the PQ, the worst economic recession since the Great Depression, the dissolution of revolutionary groups and difficult battles between the labour movement and the PQ's Rene Levesque government.

Internationally, Reagan and Thatcher ushered in the age neoliberalism. The welfare state was on its way out and policies of privatization and massive cuts in social spending became the order of the day.

## *The austere eighties and the downfall of ANEEQ*

In Quebec, the Liberal Party succeeded the PQ in 1985. Under pressure from their youth wing, however, the Liberals promised to maintain the freeze on tuition fees. This regime change was bad news for the RAEU and the FAECQ, whose bodies were entirely controlled by PQ activists. Both organizations eventually collapsed into irrelevance. The next year, in 1986, the education minister declared that the tuition freeze should be abandoned. He went as far as saying there were "twice too many university students in Quebec".

A few months later, ANEEQ, after a campaign of general assemblies and a 5000-strong demonstration on parliament hill, launched a general strike. The main demands, issued by GA's and

adopted in a congress of ANEEQ members and non-members, were to force the government to promise to maintain the freeze, to dump university ancillary fees and again to improve student financial aid. Just two weeks into the strike in which about 25 unions participated, the education minister came out with a promise to maintain the freeze until the next election and temporarily abandon ancillary fees at UQAM. On the issue of student financial aid, he promised a series of meetings with students, in which the demands would be "considered".

While the student unions decided to stop the strike, at least temporarily, a number of occupations of government buildings were organized the following year to keep up the pressure. Months went by and the negotiation meetings promised by the government didn't produce any results for the students. So as a response, ANEEQ launched a call for a new general strike to try and materialize their demands for improvements to student financial aid. Unfortunately, the 1988 student strike never took off.

The Liberal party went on to be reelected, and in 1990 they announced a huge tuition fee hike, bringing them from $500 per year to more than $1200. At the same time, it gave universities the power to increase these fees by up to 10%. Once again, ANEEQ's student unions set off plans for a general strike. During the strike campaign, the government hammered its justification for the hike by saying that better financial aid (bigger loans available) would compensate the effects of the hike on poorer students. At the same time, the student right got organized. A group of Cegep student unions opposed to the strike formed the FECQ and allied themselves with another recently formed university student federation, the FEUQ. As the successors of the pro-PQ, RAEU and FAECQ the two organizations promoted an essentially lobbyist strategy. Their hostility to mass mobilization marked a new break with the student movement's legacy of syndicalism.

Unfortunately, the 1990 attempt to build a general student strike was a big failure. Three years later, pulled down by intense internal strife, ANEEQ was disbanded.

For the next six years, FECQ and FEUQ would have free reign over the student movement, allowing them ample time and space to enroll a sizeable chunk of local student unions. The student left would only get reorganized around opposition to the federal Axworthy reforms in 1994. The reforms proposed would see transfers to provinces for health and education slashed.

## *Renewal of student syndicalism*

Common initiatives between a few local student unions (protest organising, a mobilization committee and a radical student newspaper) eventually lead to the formation of the Mouvement pour le droit à l'éducation (Movement for the right to education), or MDE. In 1996, Pauline Marois, the PQ education minister at the time, announced a hike in university tuition fees and Cegep ancillary fees. The MDE spearheaded a general strike movement, which unions affiliated with FECQ and the FEUQ eventually joined. After about three weeks of strike, Marois announced she would scrap plans to hike the fees, but with a catch. She would implement a new "failure tax" on college students, (a form of taxation on students that fail classes) a measure proposed to her by the leadership of the FECQ! That move was immediately considered as treason by the radical activists and rank-and–file who helped build the movement that stopped the hike in tuition fees. A lot of people were convinced that the strength of the mobilization could have gotten rid of the tuition fee hike, and that the trade-off was a move deliberately made to abort the strike quickly and help the FECQ get more credibility in the eyes of the government.

Even though this bittersweet victory consolidated the motivation of the student left to keep organizing, the MDE had a difficult time escaping marginality and gaining a significant membership. It died off in 2000.

However, despite its relatively small membership, the MDE kept alive radical ideas and practices. Its whole existence relied on the need to distrust leaders, on rank-and-file syndicalism and direct action. For example, in the year following the 1996 strike and the FECQ-FEUQ's leaders sellout agreement with the PQ government, the MDE would continue to organize protests and occupations, demanding a substantial increase of minimum wage, a 32-hour work week as well as free and quality health and education systems. As such, MDE contributed to preserve combative syndicalism and to oppose FECQ-FEUQ's lobbyist corporatism.

The prospective that the FECQ and the FEUQ would once again dominate the scene and that the student movement would gradually distance itself from its heritage as a combative and democratic force was too just hard to accept for many activists involved in the 1996 strike and the anti-globalization movement at the turn of the century. So in the hopes of helping the student movement return to its former glory, in 2001, several historically radical local student unions decided to unite under the banner of the Association pour une Solidarité Syndicale, which translates roughly to Association for Solidarity Among Student Unions. (Incidentally, the acronym, ASSÉ, in French is a play on words for "enough".)

This overview of the birth of the student movement in Quebec, 1968, the first syndicalist student unions, the battles of the '70s, '80 and '90 should give a feel for where the 2012 strike comes from. At this point, it's probably clear that there's a lot more to the origins of the strike in Quebec than mere spontaneity.

Furthermore, it's relevant to note that every student strike has been a major turning point in the development of the student movement. After '68 student unions were destroyed, the one in '74 gave rise to ANEEQ, in '78 we saw a new rift between radicals and lobbyists, after the success in '86 the lobbyists lost ground, the failure of '88 divided ANEEQ and the aftermath of another failed strike in '90 helped lobbyist student federations establish themselves permanently.

Quebec's student movement as it exists today was essentially shaped by mass, collective and syndicalist-type politics and action.

And yet, the student movement isn't homogenous, far from it. This vast general strike of last spring in Quebec gave an impression of a united front of the three main student unions: ASSÉ, FECQ and FEUQ. Underneath the media hype, the relationship between these organizations is a lot more complex – and caustic – than images of unitary student protests led on. But it isn't a parochial conflict: it's a question of fundamental disagreements on elements of both practices and political outlook.

Before addressing this aspect, it's worth looking more closely at ASSÉ's history. (ASSÉ is the Quebec-wide student union that created CLASSE by opening itself to unaffiliated unions to join temporarily). Those who followed the strike more closely already know that it's been the main force, the main protagonist of that struggle. Getting an understanding of ASSÉ's history is key to better understanding the origins of the strike.

## *A brief history of ASSÉ*

In 2001 the "failure tax", inherited from the dealings of FECQ during the 1996 strike, was taking its toll on college students. A coalition of independent local student unions formed around the project to launch a campaign to abolish that tax. Here, a few things started working in favor of creating a new syndicalist student union.

First, it quickly became obvious how working outside of the formal structures of an organization weighed down on the organizing efforts of the campaign. How are the costs to be shared? How can the resources of each association be pooled? Who will track general progress between meetings? etc. Second, while the student unions were confident they would be able to stir up a sizeable opposition movement (the failure tax was really hated), there was specific concern regarding the FECQ. As the group that agreed to the failure tax in the first place, the unions worried that it might appropriate the movement as its own and use it to negotiate another rotten outcome against the wishes of the rank-and-file.

Eventually, those preoccupations were confirmed when FECQ, who wasn't taking part in mobilizations at all, negotiated "student performance contracts" in exchange for dumping the failure tax. Outside the student movement, there was the broader political context. In the 1990's the first half of the decade was dominated by the question of sovereignty, leading up to the 1995 referendum.

But the second half of that decade really set the tone. The PQ's obsession with zero-deficit resulted in cuts of nearly 2 billion dollars in education alone. In 2000, during a "Quebec Youth Summit", the government agreed to re-inject public funds into education but under conditions to implement a series of reforms inspired by neoliberal, free-market policies. It was baptized "plan Legault" after the PQ's minister of education.

On a global level, negotiations by states for a multitude of international trade agreements on capital and services pointed to a new era in the globalization of capitalism. Reports and investigations into these negotiations showed how far western states were ready to go to empower capital against people. At the same time, the WTO summit in Seattle revealed the extent of popular resistance.

Similar events happened in Washington, Genoa and Quebec City with the Summit of the Americas in 2001. ASSÉ's first activists were immersed in the anti-globalization movement. In the first months of ASSÉ, it renamed its campaign against the "plan Legault" as a campaign "against the steering of education by market laws". In doing so, it manifested a rejection of narrow and piecemeal understanding of state education policies. Instead by highlighting the role of "market laws", it sought to tie together the various reforms being implemented in Cegeps and universities and it also linked those changes to the dynamics of international trade agreements and capitalist globalization.

Even though it was off to a good start, the campaign ran out of steam. At this point ASSÉ was rather small and had only about a dozen member unions. It then decided to focus on opposition to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The campaign rallied students all across the student movement. As it did, it forced the federations, FECQ and FEUQ to respond with their own campaign surrounding NAFTA. But they couldn't bring themselves to get with a radical anti-NAFTA agenda, so they settled on a corporatist and responsible demand of "No to the inclusion of education in NAFTA".

At a large meeting of local student unions from all affiliations, only a tiny fraction decided to follow the student federations' campaign while the vast majority rallied behind ASSÉ and a clear rejection of NAFTA. On October 31st 2002, 10 000 participated in a Montreal march against NAFTA.

In the first few years of ASSÉ's existence, its struggles were about global dynamics on which the student movement had very little grab. The fight against NAFTA wasn't able to spark a mobilization outside the student movement. While the 2003 antiwar movement against the intervention in Iraq had a popular character from its inception, the student unions weren't able to underline any specific political objectives it could work towards. When it tackled the phenomenon of the "steering of education by market laws", it was campaigning against nothing less than the vast neoliberal restructuring of education, which, at the same time, was fast becoming a fact.

Nonetheless, ASSÉ was still able to build its base of support among students. In the context of wide opposition to international summits (NAFTA, WTO, G8, G20…), the student body responded enthusiastically to calls for mobilization. Through the experience of these first struggles, ASSÉ's activists were able to develop an open political vision and a deeper understanding of issues. A new frame of thinking made its way into the student movement: the roots of our day-to-day problems, including in education, could be found in the international economy – more specifically in the relationship that builds between human populations and capital.

In 2003, however, the focus went from international to local with the election of a new Liberal government and its plans for "state reengineering". It was a shock for the labor and community groups used to the PQ's smooth approach of concertation. The Liberals wasted no time in implementing anti-social reforms, including in education. ASSÉ put out a call for a general strike in 2003 against a hike in ancillary fees, but it ultimately failed to get more than a few unions on board.

The lessons learned through that campaign came in handy when the next year, in 2004, the government announced a reform of student financial aid, converting 103 million dollars from bursaries into loans. ASSÉ reacted by organizing a wide consultation of student general assemblies in order to build a platform of demands and start building up momentum towards a strike action.

Tours of Cegeps and universities were organized, as well as massive distribution of material calling for the strike, demonstrations and even occupations of MP offices. Because it was conscious that a successful strike movement would necessarily need to include other unaffiliated student unions, ASSÉ began planning for a student strike coalition. The student federations, FECQ and FEUQ, adopted a wait-and-see approach to the strike. While ASSÉ activists were busy working at mobilizing students on campuses across the province, FECQ and FEUQ were content with "representing" student interests at Liberal Party meetings and the "Generations Summit" orchestrated by the government.

To add insult to injury, the day the general strike was launched in February 2005, they went on the record declaring that it wasn't the appropriate time for student mobilization and that they had no plans to join the strike. In fact, since the education minister had been replaced just a few weeks earlier, they wanted to "give him a chance".

Well, the student movement didn't concur. Within two weeks over 70 000 student were on strike in Quebec, including some from student unions affiliated with FECQ and FEUQ. The two federations were forced to join the strike or risk having some serious representation issues… That

about-face turned out to be a mixed blessing. While the strike kept expanding in the following weeks, the issue of negotiations came up. After one meeting of the ASSÉ strike coalition negotiations committee, the education minister declared he wouldn't pursue further negotiations with the student group before it renounced "violence".

Of course, what he wanted the student unions to renounce was in fact occupation of offices, rowdy protests and blockades. In other words, the only tools at the disposal of students to effectively disrupt business as usual and force the government into negotiations. The issue was to create lots of debate among general assemblies and meetings of the strike coalition, but in the end, in part because of the involvement of anarchists and other radical student activists, the coalition maintained its commitment to combative militancy.

The student federations, on the other hand, immediately renounced violence and began closed negotiations with the government. At that time, the strike coalition represented about a third of the movement but also the longest striking unions, so the move created a lot of discontent, even among the rank-and-file of the student federations, some of whom launched a plea with their leadership to stop negotiating in the absence of delegates from the strike coalition.

Five weeks into the strike, the leaderships of FECQ and FEUQ announced an agreement to end the conflict. That agreement would see the cuts reversed, but only partially for a few years, with the full amount being reinvested later. By undermining the unity and determination of the movement, the move succeeded in putting an end to the strike, with the most resilient unions ending the strike after the seventh week. In a large part because of the insistence of ASSÉ, however, that in the interest of maintaining democratic control of the movement, any outcome of negotiations be put to a vote, a huge number of general assemblies rejected the agreement while at the same time voting off the strike.

There was a lot of anger at FECQ and FEUQ's leaderships during and after the strike. A lot of students from all quarters of the student movement felt they squandered the movement's largest mobilization ever. Not only that, but the struggle made the political divide between the two poles of the movement obvious.

FEUQ eventually payed a high price. Between 2005 and 2007, three significant campus unions left the federation, including the huge McGill undergraduate student union. As is often the case when chapters of struggle come to a close, the 2005 strike left mixed feelings of victory and defeat. Victory, for one, because the strike happened, because it grew into the biggest student strike in history and because its power was enough to force the government into making a concession, however small. But defeat also, because the strike coalition built around ASSÉ wasn't strong enough to prevent FECQ and FEUQ from appropriating the movement and squandering the mobilization in exchange for tiny concessions.

Even though the Liberals reluctantly agreed to reinvest some amount into financial aid, their next step couldn't be clearer: a hike in university tuition fees. They didn't wait five years, until 2012, to do it, though… They dropped the official announcement in 2007: a hike of 30%, spread over five years, with a further hike down the road in 2012.

Unfortunately, 2007 was a much less glorious chapter than 2005. ASSÉ took a bold stand to launch a general strike with the main demand of free tuition, no less. No more than just a handful of student unions got a strike mandate. The failure to block the hike in 2007 was a big blow, but as the student movement in Quebec has shown, it's got an ability to evolve, learn from its mistakes and do better.

Lots of different things were highlighted as having contributed to the failure. Bad internal dynamics in ASSÉ, not enough mobilization done on campuses, material not having been solid enough… The most significant element however, might have been the political miscalculation of having called for a general student strike on the basis of free tuition. In a way this was a break we can't help but notice that the largest and most successful struggles were given sets of realistic, immediate goals. In '68 you had the demand for democratization of higher education, in the '70s and '80s students fought for adequate financial aid and against hikes in tuition fees, and so forth. It's through these kinds of objectives that the movement is able to mobilize and grow.

Part of the success of the student movement in Quebec is based on an ability to relate to the concerns of regular students, to speak to their day-to-day experience, while at the same time being able to articulate all this to a wider political analysis that seeks to address the issues at their root.

## *Student unions are relevant*

All through the history of the student movement in Quebec, the syndicalist tendency maintained that students need to organize into unions. It was true then, and it's still true today.

For sure, students don't form a homogenous class in the same way workers do. In any given campus, students with a really wealthy background might rub shoulders with others who can barely make ends meets. But despite different socio-economic backgrounds, students do form a community and they do have a certain set of common interests, independently of their political, philosophical or religious opinions.

Chiefly there's the issue of accessibility to education. With tuition constantly increasing, students being pushed deeper and deeper into debt, being forced into precarious jobs to survive, the dream of higher education is fast becoming a nightmare. The gap between the myth of equality of chances and the reality of this lie is getting deeper. There are also matters of the quality of education, in terms of student-teacher ratio for example. Access to appropriate study equipment: good libraries, study space, etc. There's also concern about corporate influence over the content of courses and how programs are structured, not to mention the orientation of research more and more towards the needs of big business while fundamental research (which doesn't serve industry profits) is gradually being abandoned. These are all issues that can cement support for student unions.

At the same time, lots of students are really deeply involved in different kinds of groups on campuses such as Public Interest Research Groups. They do a lot of hard work and they address important issues. But that kind of organizing isn't a substitute for student unions. Political groups alone can't hope to build a movement of the same nature that we've seen in Quebec because their aim simply isn't to build unity among students.

## *Combative unionism*

Now, of course most campuses these days already have some kind of student-led structure. So obviously, it's not enough for students to organize into unions. There are different types of unions and there's different unionisms too.

The success of the student strike is a product of a certain kind of unionism that's called "combative unionism". In the context of Quebec, it's not something imagined by academics or dreamed up by industrial relations students. Combative unionism is the explicit strategy, and set of practices, promoted by the syndicalist tendency in the student movement. In a nutshell, it calls for democratic, combative and autonomous unions. This is what CLASSE is made of.

### *Democracy*

First, combative unionism says a union should be run by its members, for its members, and the only way to do that is to practice direct democracy. It's a clear rejection of representative democracy. When disagreements and struggles are mediated by leaders who can act without grassroots support or consultation, it's inevitably the interests of authorities that are served, not the members.

The fundamental tool of direct democracy is the general assembly. Only in general assemblies can everyone voice their ideas on equal footing, and where these voices can produce collective decisions which are then binding on the whole union. These meetings are important because they allow students to engage each other and develop capacities for debate and critical thinking.

The power of executive boards is explicitly limited to implementing the decisions of the assemblies and running the day-to-day operations of the union. Unions, which practice combative unionism, also have minimal bureaucracy. Paid employees aren't a substitute for anemic participation in the structures of a union and instead of fixing the problem; it merely makes it permanent (ASSÉ has always had one employee). Dealing with administrations or higher authorities isn't based on the power of representation, but on delegation. Delegates have a clear mandate of which positions to defend and have no authority to accept any compromise.

Information is also key to a healthy democracy, so combative unions rely on alternative and autonomous media to inform their members. Whether its through posters, leaflets or newspapers, a combative union will use the means at its disposal to make relevant news available to students and use those as opportunities to directly engage with them and get them involved. In the same vein, transparency, on all levels of organization is made as real as possible.

### *Combativity*

The second core idea of combative unionism, is, well, combativeness. Its militant tactics stem from an understanding that contrary to what the dominant ideology makes us think, the state isn't a neutral institution where all sectors of society have equal standing. In reality, the state is a tool in the hands of private business interests and completely submitted by the power of finance. As a result, we can't ever hope to shame or convince the government into accepting student demands.

That's why combative unionism, through mass mobilization and the power in numbers, seeks to build itself as a permanent counter-power that can force the satisfaction of student demands. The type of tactics it puts forth are a reflection of the unions themselves: by their members and for their members. In other words, direct action.

We have to reject the notion that direct action is necessarily violent or destructive. At its core, direct action is about the rank-and-file being at the forefront of all aspects, and not representatives or politicians. In the spirit of combative unionism, though, direct actions also need to be

mass actions. The only way to do that is by taking into account the general state of consciousness among members of the unions and their commitment to the movement. In that sense, general assemblies need to have the larger role in debating and orienting tactics.

Combative unionism is also a refusal of confining methods of protest to the limits of legality. This flows from its ideas about the nature of the state. If the state is a tool in the hands of the few, it's only logical that the laws of the state are also designed to protect them. But it doesn't make illegality into a dogma either, only that different types of actions available to the movement should be judged based on their own merit and their usefulness to the cause, not whether or not they're sanctioned by the legal system. As a result of all this, a movement based on combative unionism will ally both common methods of protest like rallies, marches and strikes, with more vigorous actions such as occupations and blockades.

### *Autonomy*

The third core idea of combative unionism is about autonomy.

In the interest of preventing alienation from its own organizing by and for its members, combative unions need to promote and materialize their autonomy with regard to the state and political groups. Autonomy with regard to state structures because students don't stand to gain anything significant by participating, especially when the nature of their demands contradict the interests that control the state.

This also translates into a rejection of participation in summits and consultations, not least because these events are always used to legitimize future government decisions that run counter to the politics of the student movement.

Autonomy also with regard to political groups and political parties. Any political party, which includes as part of its program certain demands of the student movement, once in power would inevitably have to face the politics of compromise which are often characteristic of the parliamentary system. As such, a party's political stance issued from demands of the student movement is always subject to be abandoned in the name of political realism. A number of historical examples confirm this.

### *Feminism*

Those are the three core ideas of combative unionism, which have been part of the student movement since the very beginning.

Hopefully, through the decades these ideas have been enriched and one of the ways they have been is by the incorporation of feminist thought and practices.

It's often apparent, whether it's in radical groups or mass organizations such as unions, that the voices of women are not heard as much as the men's or that more men tend to get involved in ways that bring them under the spotlight, while the involvement of women is often much more invisible.

Feminist women activists in the student movement have worked relentlessly through the years, often under much criticism of their men comrades, to integrate feminist analysis of student issues and to institutionalize feminist practices in the movement.

Today, that work is most visible, for example, by the existence of women's committees in ASSÉ and some student unions, the common rule of alternation between women and men speakers in

all types of meetings, and the integration of a team of "vibe checkers" that keep tabs on tensions and hostilities and call out participants when they use stereotyped language.

## *Conclusion*

Obviously, despite the best my efforts at synthesis, of more remains to be said about the issues raised in this article.

Many important periods in the history of the student movement, such as the year 1982 when unions fought back against legalization to framing student unions, are relevant in understanding the challenges facing student unions today.

This history of the 2012 strike itself, which isn't addressed at all, also remains to be written. And lastly, much more can be said regarding the principles and day-to-day practices of combative unionism in Quebec student unions. Though these were addressed during the conference tour with audiences, this crucial part is missing for the written record. My hope is that an upcoming website which I'm working on along with several comrades of the 2012 student strike, titled "How we won the tuition fight", will address these aspects in a more satisfying manner. Stay tuned, it will be officially announced in the comment section of this article soon!

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