

We Were There: Organizing as Feminists During the 2012 Québec Student Strike

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We were there. Every day. In the streets, in student associations' offices, in general assemblies, in student union congresses. We walked, we yelled, we chanted, we wrote, we drew, and we gave workshops and interviews. We made phone calls, organized events and direct actions. We got pepper sprayed, we got clubbed, we got arrested.

We walked and walked and walked again.

We were there, proud of ourselves for participating in this life-changing experience. We were on strike. We did not flip the world upside down, but our determination brought change. We are now more recognized as legitimate spokespersons, leaders and organizers. We are women. We were strikers. We gave this strike a stronger feminine voice. Let's not forget this.

We are two women who were part of the Québec student strike movement. We respectively study law and intercultural mediation. We do not claim to represent every women in this movement. This piece aims to unravel some of the student strike's gender dynamics, since we lived them up close and personal. Our goal here is not to reaffirm the relevance of a feminist voice within the student movement and to review the progress that has been made, especially regarding women's visibility within the movement and in mass media.

Why was the feminist struggle important for this strike?

During the strike, feminist groups tried to make the public aware of the importance of education for women and minority groups. An understanding of tuition hikes as sexist could be found on banners, in articles and manifestos written by student associations, by feminist research groups and by organizations. We believe that the hike was not literally sexist in itself, but we do consider that these kinds of decisions affect women even more than they affect men. This derives from the fact that women in Québec earn around 70 per cent of what men earn. It therefore takes women a bigger percentage of their income to pay their fees and, in the long run, it takes them more time to reimburse their student loans, therefore paying more interest on their loans and ending up having a degree that cost them more than their male counterparts.¹ Finally, if tuition fees are too high, women and other people with a lower economic status might not even choose to begin a college degree, “since access is dependent on financial resources.”²

It is partly for these reasons that a strong women’s presence was important during the strike and that our discourses needed to be heard. However, women’s visibility in the student movement was often very low compared to the amount of women students. During the strike, we had to fight our way through—sometimes literally—in order to be seen or heard. The amount of media attention given

¹ Simone de Beauvoir Institute, «Statement on Tuition Fees in Québec and their Impact on Women», Concordia University, February 2012.

² *ibid.*

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to women spokespersons was also very low compared to the fuss around CLASSE's representative Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois and FECQ's president Léo Bureau-Blouin. In the next sections, we will look at some of the difficulties we encountered while striking and why we believe feminist affinity groups and the actions they organized were important to the movement.

When something feels wrong: striking as a woman

Striking is not easy, despite what right-wingers might tell you. While striking, we often experienced situations that left us puzzled and angry. Members of the police force often called us “slut”, “bitch”, “angry lesbian”, which for us was not the end of the world, even if it was very offensive. However, when our male counterparts adopted sexist attitudes or appropriated some of our feminist actions, it hurt. It hurt real bad. More than once, we led a battle on two fronts (or more), making the whole experience of striking incredibly painful at times, but also rewarding. We will only mention a few examples here of situations when we were attacked or co-opted as women in the strike.

The first event happened at the very beginning of the strike. It was the middle of winter in Montreal, February 17th. An action had been called by a coalition of groups opposed to the increasing fees in so-called “public services” and consisted of a blockade of the Montreal World Trade Centre. One of the doors was specifically blocked by a group of women. When the police intervened, they targeted that door to make a breach, seeing women as weaker and an easier target. That had two major impacts in our opinion. First, from there on, women knew we would be a target

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of choice for the police who wish to make “an example” of us. Second, it encouraged the perception that to have a group of women doing a direct action was not a good idea and would lead to failure. We subsequently suffered a great deal from this. It became obvious, as the strike continued, that direct actions called by women or feminist groups had a hard time getting people to show up, unless a “veteran man” would vouch for us. For most strikers, the man would be seen as someone whose judgment could be trusted and that his approval was needed to participate in an action called by “inexperienced and not so militant” women.

The second event ironically happened on March 8th, International Women’s Day. A march had been organized by various feminist groups to bring attention to women’s education issues. The march was quickly co-opted by a large group of men filled with the strike’s energy and adrenaline. Some men took control of the megaphone to yell nationalist slogans and were holding bluntly sexist signs. We do not accuse them of having bad intentions; however, we felt like we did not have a place in our own march. Some successful actions were nevertheless carried out by women. One of them took place in April 2012, at the Montreal Court House. A group of feminist law students entered the building and started reading a political text out loud about the impact and wrongs of the judicial sphere’s intrusion in the student struggle. One by one, every woman was walked out of the building by special constables and banned from the Court House for the day! This action felt like a great success, not so much because of its media coverage or public attention, but because of the simple fact that it proved it is possible to organize an

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action as feminist women. We were able to communicate directly what we felt so strongly about, with no distortion from the media, men or any other source.

There were a few men who accompanied us to show support and help. They understood clearly the importance of women leading and carrying out that action. By doing so, they made an example out of themselves, widening the possibilities and ideas of the role men can have in feminist or women's actions. For once, we had allies, we were strong and believed that we had our own place in the movement. Not just as strikers, but as women and feminists.

The increase of women's visibility in the movement

Québec's main three students associations had four spokespersons in total during the strike. Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois and Jeanne Reynolds represented the CLASSE, Martine Desjardins was (and still is) the president of the FEUQ and Léo Bureau-Blouin was the president of the FECQ. When Martine and Jeanne were interviewed on their experience as women spokespersons, they affirmed that the media treated them very differently. Compared to her male counterpart, Jeanne had almost no media attention and was seen as a calm and reasonable person. Gabriel and Léo were often depicted as strong leaders that would succeed in life, sometimes almost as knights that would save the province from its neoliberal downward spiral.

At the time of writing, the student movement now has four women representing it in the media and more and more women are running for and occupying student

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associations' executive positions, thereby creating a more diversified environment and a greater visibility of women within and outside of the movement. We cannot hide that we are proud of some changes that occurred during and after the strike regarding gender dynamics, even though they are small. We will continue struggling as feminists, because if we did learn something from this strike, it is that gender issues are still very prevalent in leftist groups and in our society. This is why we walked, chanted and screamed our anger. This is why we organized in non-mixed groups. This is why we will put our bodies and our minds at risk in future struggles.