

# The Strike Movement in Québec's Regions: The Student Strike in Saguenay-Lac-Saint- Jean

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February 20, 2012. The central plaza at the CEGEP in Saint-Félicien<sup>2</sup> is bursting with people. The members of the student association's executive committee can feel the pressure rising. We had been waiting on this day for months, having worked very hard to come to this point. People were gathered for the CEGEP's special general assembly on the possibility of launching an unlimited strike. After many hours spent debating back and forth, a motion is put to the assembly: "Be it resolved that the Saint-Félicien CEGEP student association (AECSF) begin a general unlimited strike starting on Monday, February 27th, 2012." A motion to put the motion to a secret ballot vote passes, which raises the already palpable tension in the room. With 55.6 per cent voting in favour, 41.2 per cent against and 17.2 per cent abstaining, the longest strike in the history of Saint-Félicien's CEGEP began.

This piece will lay my own analysis, which is grounded in my experience as a student activist in the Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean region, specifically in Saint-Félicien, rather than striving to paint a picture of what happened in every region of Québec. At times I will provide a chronology of

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<sup>2</sup> A regional town in Québec's Lac-Saint-Jean region, pop. around 10,000.

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events, in order to draw links between the latter and the information I will share. This will shed light on the various realities of our contribution to the movement.

Although the Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean region is similar to other regions in Québec, access to post-secondary education is still a recent reality for a large number of families. A majority of university-level students who come from this region are the first in their family to reach this level of education. Unfortunately, it is also much easier in the region to espouse a populist, conventional worldview, rather than choosing the path of combativeness and direct democracy, which requires extra effort and deeper analysis.

The strike in our region began with a rocky start. Just as the Saint-Félicien CEGEP association (AECSF) and the Alma College association (AECA) were joining the ranks of CLASSE, FECQ, the more right-wing federation of CEGEP-level student unions, decided to put pressure on the executive committee members at the Jonquière CEGEP student association (a member association of FECQ at the time) to hold their strike votes before other student associations in the region. Having noticed, as FECQ had, that the state of mobilization and activism at the CEGEP in Jonquière was much weaker than elsewhere in the region, AECSF decided to hold its strike vote one week earlier than the one in Jonquière, so that the vote at the CEGEP in Jonquière would not have any consequences for other votes in other CEGEPs in the region. The gravitational pull of local strike votes is a force to be reckoned with, and if the CEGEP in Jonquière had voted against a strike before any other associations, that

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may have signed the movement's death as far as the region was concerned. All this to say that on February 20th, 2012, during our strike general assembly, our association adopted a general unlimited strike mandate that was set to begin the next week. The Saint-Félicien CEGEP was the first in the region to vote in favour of a strike in 2012; at this stage, we had no idea that we would be the only ones to hold down the fort in Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean for almost the entire duration of the movement, despite being 300 km away from the next major city (Québec City) and 500 km from Montreal.

Although students in the region were very active on a regional level – especially those at the CEGEPs in Saint-Félicien and Alma and in striking departmental student associations at UQAC (University of Québec at Chicoutimi), the geographic location of each campus played an important role since it created obstacles to how long our strike could last. Far away as we were from the effervescence in Montreal, it was at times difficult for student associations in our region to remain creative during the longest strike in the region's history. Towards the beginning, people were very motivated and there was no shortage of new ideas. There were tight picket lines every morning in spite of cold winters in the northern part of Lac-Saint-Jean. Various actions aimed at increasing visibility, or aiming to disturb the normal course of things, were organized in order to turn up the pressure. As well, we organized a regional mobilization tour of other CEGEPs in order to show other campuses that the strike was not limited to Québec's metropolitan region. These efforts furthered students' (but also the local population's) process of thinking about the legitimacy of combative struggle.

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It's worth reminding readers that combative syndicalism is less rooted in our region's popular culture than it is in Montreal's, for instance.

It is worth mentioning that our region's campuses are located many kilometres from one another and that the weather (especially in winter and spring) can be a significant impediment to mobility. The nearest campus from Saint-Félicien, in Alma, is an hour's drive away; it takes another hour to get to the metropolitan region of Saguenay. The distances covered imply steep costs, which is why hundreds of dollars were budgeted every week for moving activists around the region. Of course, it would have been possible for us to simply stay in Saint-Félicien, however it was crucial for us to stay active in order to bring in an element of diversity to the type of actions organized during the strike. In addition, we had to prove week after week that there was a certain mass of people struggling together, in order to maintain our coverage in the media and to prove that mobilization was alive and well in the region.

Add to all this the frequent trips away from the region during national demonstrations, which took place in Montreal most of the time, but often also in Québec City. Renting a single bus in order to participate in these demonstrations cost over two thousand dollars at the time! Getting to the large number of congresses happening every week in Montreal or often in Québec was also expensive. The student strike even left our association's finances in the red, in spite of help from better-off CEGEP associations. There is something paradoxical about the fact that student associations in the regions, which tend to be

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smaller than urban associations, have smaller budgets and longer distances to cover, while associations in the major cities have more means and incur fewer expenses on this front.

During general assemblies, we had the opportunity to witness interesting and powerful debates. The local dynamic was such that many concepts were not yet understood in the region. This fact is perfectly understandable since many subjects hadn't yet been discussed and reflected upon in the region. Direct democracy, combative syndicalism, the legitimacy of disruptive and/or direct actions, feminism, neoliberalism, and many more concepts were all subjects that led to long debates during general assemblies. It would be impossible to minimize the significance of the positions that we adopted during that period of time. I believe AECSF and its membership progressed during the strike, since debates over these concepts took place at a time when general assemblies were well attended.

The biggest source of demoralization for the region's activists was no doubt a sense of isolation or being powerless to change the course of the national movement. We could not act as much as we would have liked. We were all very much conscious of the sweeping mobilization of Québec's students; the fact remained that various levels of government, Minister's offices, and the media are located in Québec's two biggest cities. In spite of this, we lobbied week after week for national actions to be organized in the regions more frequently, in order to create a network of solidarity linking all of Québec's students.

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A small number of activists coming in from the bigger cities would also been the missing ingredient in order to organize actions in the regions which we could not have organized ourselves. This type of outreach would have demonstrated solidarity between striking students in different cities and would have contributed to breaking the sense of isolation of students in the regions. We regularly got comments from students who felt that they were no longer important within the strike movement. This feeling emanated from the nature of decisions made during the different CLASSE congresses. On the one hand, the amount of mobilization and travelling that was asked of students everywhere in Québec, for national actions as well as for other types of demonstrations, was astounding. On the other hand, we noticed that very little was set in motion in order to support the efforts of regional associations in return for their participation in a national movement. A measure of decentralization would have allowed us to keep up a sense of belonging to the strike movement amongst the region's students, and possibly to encourage support for the movement by the largest possible number of students.

Another significant part of this story is the late arrival of the Alma College student association (AECA) to our region's strike movement. This was very good news for the students that were already on strike, since it contributed to creating some regional solidarity. However, this good news was short-lived, since this student association was the first one in Québec to be subject to a court injunction against the strike. The national movement's reaction to this interference by the courts was noticeably weaker than everywhere else. Activists from outside the region

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suggested to the local activist base that they should disrupt the resumption of classes; However, this type of disruption led to police lines being formed inside the school in order to search students and to enforce 'law and order.' This, in the absence of a sufficiently large and embattled activist presence, led to a sense of disempowerment. Although the idea of disrupting the forced return to class was a good one, it was unrealistic to think that the activist base from the CEGEP in Alma could have managed to interrupt classes in its own institution, while students everywhere else benefitted from broad activist support in order to succeed. The student union in Alma did not have the same level of support as other associations that faced injunctions later on. They never benefitted from external support in order to form hard the picket lines that would have been needed to defend their strike mandate.

The students at the CEGEP in Saint-Félicien ended up continuing the strike, alone again this time, alongside a few departmental student associations at UQAC who were already faced with their administration's disregard. Three and a half weeks before the end of our strike, with no more money left to organize major actions, AECSF organized a permanent encampment on the CEGEP's grounds. From this moment onwards, week after week, the strike continued with smaller and smaller percentages voting in favour. On April 30th, 2012, AECSF was mandated by its general assembly not to use the strike as a pressure tactic anymore, and the CEGEP student body resumed courses on May 2nd, 2012. If things had panned out differently, I believe it's a fact that many activists at the CEGEP in Saint-Félicien would have continued their strike till the very end. During future strikes, it will be important to consolidate

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solidarity with Québec's regions, by introducing a form of decentralization through the creation or consolidation of regional-level student associations. We must continue to contribute to the development of civic participation in the regions in order to create a sense of belonging to a struggle, in order to reinforce the legitimacy of this struggle. The strike was not only characterized by hard times and fruitless attempts: the strike also rolled back the limits of the world for a significant activist base, and expanded our understanding of today's neoliberal system.

A more solid and combative activist base is now present in the Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean region. We now simply need to find a way to immediately consolidate the region's combative elements, in order to eliminate the population's lethargy and to maintain a culture of wakefulness and constant vigilance, especially against various organizations such as the student federations (FECQ and FEUQ). Thankfully, organizations like these, which take the steam out of popular movements and of civic criticism, won't be able to count on ignorance any more to further their organizational goals in our region. This will provide room for student associations as well as for various more combative movements to work on long-term social goals.