

# Introduction

*Collectif Dix Novembre*<sup>1</sup>

## About this book

The spring and summer of 2012 saw the emergence of a massive social movement in Québec, centered around—but growing beyond—a student strike. The strike was called in opposition to a 75 per cent increase in university tuition fees announced by Québec’s Liberal government under then-Premier, Jean Charest. From February 2012 until the following September, the streets of Montreal, Québec City and other towns in the province were alive with demonstrations and protest actions. Students walked out of class and stayed out, picketing their academic institutions and even holding barricades against police intervention; over 3,000 people were arrested over the course of those few months, new repressive laws were introduced and resisted, and solidarity between groups and across sectors was built and tested.

The aim of this book is both to provide a glimpse into the lived experience of this social movement for the benefit of those who were not a part of it, and to uncover some of the lessons that can be garnered from a reflexive look back at the movement. It brings together contributions by students and non-students, academics, parents, activists, anarchists, artists, and others, most of which were written as the mass mobilizations began to subside in the fall

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<sup>1</sup> With input from Hugo Bonin, Arnaud Theurillat, and Guillaume Néron.

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of 2012. The book is meant to be accessible to a wide audience, including those without previous knowledge of the 2012 strike or the Québec context. It is our hope that the information and ideas shared in the chapters that follow will inspire and inform reflection and future social movement action in Québec and elsewhere.

### **Québec and Canada: some historical context**

Before delving into the origins of the 2012 strike, we believe it is necessary to provide historical context about Québec. We do not intend to convey the idea that the 2012 strike was possible only in the context of a specific set of ‘local’ or ‘national’ histories; nonetheless, we believe the 2012 strike was deeply influenced by a unique context whose basic contours must be sketched out in order to fully comprehend the role of student movement in Québec. Readers who might want to incorporate some practices from Québec’s history of social movements into their own struggles may also draw valuable lessons from this section.

The roots of Québec’s current sociopolitical context can be traced back to the 16th century, when colonists from France invaded and settled land along a few major ‘North American’ waterways. The lands along these waterways were being used by many different agricultural or nomadic Indigenous peoples, including Innu, Mi’kmaq, Wolastoqiyik (Malécite), Abenaki, Kanien’kehá:ka (Mohawk), Anishinaabe, and Huron nations, among others. Québec’s two major cities, Montreal and Québec City, as well as the majority of the province’s population, are still located along this waterway, often at the site of fur-

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trading or military outposts established by the European invaders. Catholic missionaries, such as the Jesuits, played a significant role in the process of colonization, acting as both ideological promoters of the colonial project back in Europe, settler landowners (for instance, the entire island of Montreal was once owned by a missionary order), and as actors in an attempt to strip Indigenous peoples of their cultural autonomy in order to assimilate them into the settler society. As we will see, the Catholic Church retained a crucial importance in Québec society until at least the 1960s, but was not successful in extinguishing Indigenous cultures. The Church's strong presence this late in Québec history is an important factor shaping its society to this day.

The French colony of Canada was annexed by the British Empire in the 1760s, which imposed a military government on the former French colony while allowing certain Francophone elites and the Roman Catholic Church to continue exercising power over the French-Canadian population and Indigenous peoples. The Catholic Church's powers increased after anti-British rebellions led by liberal or republican political movements. In 1867, both existing parts of Canada (which later became Ontario and Québec) joined British colonies on the eastern seaboard as part of what is called Confederation, whose northward and westward expansion in a campaign of invasion, colonization, settlement, genocide, forced labour and enslavement of non-white people has created the contemporary State of Canada.

During the 19th century, the basic features of the current settler order in Canada were established:

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Indigenous people were pushed into thousands of reserves, ostensibly with the purpose of doing away with the nomadic aspects of their livelihoods, in order to convert them into agricultural peoples. In practice, reserves are often located on remote land that is difficult to use for agricultural purposes—their function has overwhelmingly been to free up the best agricultural lands for use by settlers. During the same period, residential schools managed by the Catholic Church or other types of missionaries were established, in which children from reserves were taken to spend most of the year away from their communities, as an attempt at cultural genocide. These schools existed into the 20th century. Today, many Indigenous people in Canada do live off-reserve today. However, reserves continue to be bastions of cultural survival for Indigenous peoples in this country against the forces of assimilation and colonization, in spite of the poor living conditions on many reserves (which may include pollution, lack of running water, poor-quality housing, and under-funded educational facilities).

Although at the time of Confederation the French-speaking settler elites were originally more or less as powerful as English-speaking settler elites, Canada's expansion during the late 19th and 20th century meant that Québec, as well as French-speaking minority populations in other provinces such as Ontario and New Brunswick, became dominated by English speakers and therefore were unable to impose any sort of agenda beyond regional or provincial jurisdictions. Beginning in the early 20th century, this caused the rise of a nationalist movement based in Québec, which took on its current form more or less in the 1960s as nationalists shifted from

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aspirations for greater autonomy for French-language speakers within the Canadian federation, to aspirations for national independence for Québec. Since this shift, the word 'national' as used in Québec most often refers to Québec, and not to Canada, which is referred to as a 'federal' level of politics. The conflict opposing federalists and those in favour of independence can be understood primarily, but *not exclusively*, as a struggle between two settler nations over who gets to benefit from the colonial 'pie', with francophones in Québec vying to wrest state and economic power from the descendants of English-speaking settlers (this is discussed in greater detail below).

The fact that this conflict has been so foregrounded in official histories of Québec, with the implication that the primary form of oppression during these centuries was enacted by English-speakers against French-speakers, has erased the fact that other groups of people have lived Québec for centuries and faced oppression on a racial basis. For instance, Black people have been in Québec since the 17th century, most (but not all) arriving as slaves. Slavery existed in Québec under both French and British rule. Thereafter Black people remained in Québec, mostly in Montreal, working at the bottom of the occupational scale. By the end of the 19th century a Black community had developed in Montreal, with many Black people migrating from the United States and elsewhere in Canada, especially after Canadian-owned railway companies began hiring Black men working as porters. By the mid-20th century, changes to immigration policies led to significant increases in Caribbean migrants moving to Canadian cities including Montreal. These stories, and those of many other racialized communities in Québec such as people of

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Chinese origin, are absent even from activist accounts of Québec's history.

### **The development of Québec since the Quiet Revolution**

The 1960s witnessed a period of major reforms in Québec known as the 'Quiet Revolution'. During the 1960 provincial elections, a government whose power was based on corruption, populism, social conservatism, and its proximity to the Catholic Church (which, in the latter case, made it similar to virtually every provincial administration since the 1840s) was defeated by the Liberal Party of Québec, an established moderate political party that promised to quickly modernize Québec. Over a period of fifteen years, hydroelectric production was nationalized and expanded (although mostly in Northern territories unceded at the time by Indigenous peoples), roads were built, and a welfare state was created by taking away the Catholic Church's power over health care, social services and education and centralizing all these institutions under the provincial State. Many new educational institutions were also created during these years. The 1960s saw a rapid increase in access to education in Québec.

The 1960s and 1970s were also a time of intense social movement activity in Québec. Student movements took off in 1968 during Québec's first general student strike, whose demands included access to post-secondary institutions for working class youths and francophones, clarification about the government's plans for student financial aid, as well as more democratic universities. All these demands were issued alongside a general critique of capitalism. Fifteen out of the twenty-three existing CEGEPs (general

and vocational colleges, see glossary) went on strike for about one month. The strike accelerated the creation of the Université du Québec network, with campuses built in many of Québec's smaller regional centres in order to facilitate greater access to education to people not living in major cities. The 1968 strike also achieved the abolition of mandatory class attendance for students enrolled in CEGEPs—a first step towards recognizing the right of students to strike by not attending class.

The largest demonstration in Québec since the French-Canadian movements against military conscription during WWII took place in 1969: the march targeted McGill University, then one of three universities in Montreal and the bastion of a pro-Canadian, anti-Québécois, English-speaking bourgeoisie. The march was organized by a coalition of French language rights groups, left-wing militants, labour activists and nascent student associations; demands centered around transforming McGill into a francophone and working-class institution and increasing access to education for working-class and francophone students. These demands were partly met with the construction of the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQÀM), which opened in the fall of 1969. At this point in the late 1960s, left-wing, labour, nationalist, and student activists worked on the basis of an imagined convergence between working-class and pro-francophone politics. This convergence was, in the end, short-lived: nationalist and language politics in Québec rapidly took on a life of their own, eventually at the expense of working-class or revolutionary politics.

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This period of time also saw the rise of a radical black political movement in Montreal. A Congress of Black Writers was held in Montreal in October of 1968, contributing to ongoing networking between Black intellectuals and activists on both sides of the Atlantic. In February 1969, students protesting institutional racism at the city's second English-language university, Sir George Williams University, occupied the school's computer center, an action that ended in a major fire, millions of dollars in damages to the computer center, and several arrests. The anti-colonial ideas that were tapped into and developed by black radicals in Montreal at the time also filtered into white, francophone settings, and some people on the left began to speak a language of anti-colonial struggle that was spreading throughout the world when analyzing the situation of Québécois people within Canada.

Since the early 1960s, a pro-independence revolutionary network of autonomous cells called the *Front de libération du Québec* (FLQ) had also organized bombings and other terrorist actions targeting the anglophone bourgeoisie and their allies. In 1970, one FLQ cell kidnapped a British diplomat as well as the provincial Minister of Labour. The latter ended up dead under nebulous circumstances, thus sparking the 'October Crisis'. Although many groups, including student associations at the University of Montreal and UQÀM, expressed support for the FLQ's goals (if not for its aims) during mass rallies, an unprecedented wave of arrests targeting social movement activists and even sympathisers was quickly orchestrated by various levels of government, alongside a very visible military presence in major cities across Canada.

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Most social movements in Québec suffered from major demobilizations after the 1970 repression. For many years afterwards, the labour movement was the main oppositional force alongside strong Marxist-Leninist and Maoist far-left movements. A historic general labour strike was organized in 1972, and the labour movement became increasingly militant throughout this decade, with some of its structures (such as the Montreal Central Council of the CSN, formerly a catholic union federation but now Québec's major public-sector union) serving as a point of convergence between various non-labour social movements. Québec's major union federations also took qualified positions in favour of Québec independence in the 1970s.

A new wave of feminist activism also swept Montreal during the early 1970s, as English-speaking and French-speaking feminists developed a synthesis of anti-colonial ideas and the ideas developed by second-wave feminism in the USA. The result of this activism has been a lasting affinity, although by no means an unconditional support, of some parts of the feminist movement in Québec towards the ideal of national liberation for the people of Québec. The 1970s also saw Indigenous women in Québec—and eventually across the country—resisting the most sexist parts of the legal framework governing their lives and which stripped only women of their status if they married non-status-Indian men, a cause which earned the support of Québec's mainstream feminist organizing as well.

During that time Québécois nationalist members of the Liberal Party joined with other nationalists in Québec to form the Parti Québécois (PQ), which won the 1976

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elections. The PQ worked towards a referendum on Québec's independence from Canada in 1980, drawing on the energy of many activists who were or had been involved in social movements. The referendum was defeated by a 10% margin; this struck another huge blow to social movements in Québec, which had placed many hopes beyond just independence in the outcome of this plebiscite.

Since the campaign leading up to the 1980 plebiscite, nationalist forces have been able to sideline left-wing activism around social issues by claiming these can only be effectively addressed after Québec has gained independence from the Canadian federation. This pervasive logic has taken a significant amount of steam out of social struggles in Québec, not least since another attempt at secession was made in 1995, again by a PQ government, but was defeated by a very slim margin (less than 1%).

The 1970s, 1980s and 1990s were an intense period of struggle over the political constitution of the new post-British-Empire Canadian state, beyond the two referendums over Québec sovereignty and beyond the conflict between the Canadian federalist and Québécois national projects: these decades were also a period of resurgent First Nations militancy. For instance, in 1990, when the town of Oka in Québec decided to allow a golf course to be expanded onto Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk) territory, a months-long military conflict involving Mohawk warriors, the Canadian army and Québec's provincial police was touched off. The events are commonly known as the Oka Crisis and they helped shift the balance of power a bit more towards Indigenous

nations in Canada, which appeared (again) as tangible menaces to the legitimacy of all levels of government within the settler State.

### **Current issues in Québec society and politics: the backdrop to the 2012 social uprising**

Although Québec remains a province within the Canadian federation, the provincial State in Québec has acquired some of the powers that are usually exercised by the federal government in many other provinces. Parti Québécois governments may not have succeeded in leading Québec into full nation-statehood, but they have been relatively successful at creating a political space in which the federal state's decisions, and Canadian politics, at least *appear* to matter very little to people in Québec most of the time. Immigration policies are debated and voted upon at the Québec level; people pay most of their taxes directly to the provincial government; and when local police forces are unable to repress a demonstration in Montreal, the provincial police force (the *Sûreté du Québec*) is called in—not the Royal Canadian Mounted Police nor the army.

The effect of this has been that the Québécois political sphere has gained a high level of autonomy from the Canadian sphere. This process has been mirrored by a civil society of unions, community groups, and other movements (such as the student and feminist movements) which tend to focus on issues pertaining mainly to the decisions of the provincial government. This trend is encouraged by the fact that the Québec state is the force determining the level of spending and of income

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redistribution within the welfare state—not the federal government.

An important caveat to the importance of the national question within social movements in Québec is that the question of Québec sovereignty has not been very present within the student movement since the campaign leading up to the 1995 referendum, when many student associations closer to the student federations FECQ and FEUQ mobilized in favour of sovereignty. This fact probably helped focus the discourse of the student movement in 2012 towards economic (as opposed to national) questions, with the probable effect of making it easier to mobilize support for the strike in English-language universities and outside Québec, on the basis of opposition to neoliberalism.

Of course, the relatively successful delimitation of a Québécois political space by nationalist governments, civil society and social movements applies much less to Indigenous peoples in Québec, whose lives are constantly affected by the federal government's decisions in an invasive way, since this level of government manages anything to do with so-called 'Indian affairs'. This being said, in the late 2000s and early 2010s, the Québec government had unveiled an expansive plan to ramp up the colonization of the Northern territories claimed by Québec and by Indigenous peoples. This plan, called the Plan Nord, was very contentious during the 2012 strike; Joël Pedneault's chapter provides more information about this plan, and explains the complexities of opposition to resource extraction projects affecting Indigenous peoples in Québec.

A few other issues affecting Québec nevertheless are still affected by the federal government's decisions, and have proved contentious: the constitutionality of pro-French language laws, criminal law, prison policy, military spending, gun control, and the ultimate enforcement of immigration decisions (ie deportations) are all currently under federal control.

In 2012, during the student strike, the Liberal Party was in government in Québec and had been for about nine years. In order to really account for the scope of popular opposition to this government, it is necessary to take into account the fact that this political party is both right-wing as well as pro-Canadian or pro-federalist. It is impossible to tell what proportion of the hundreds of thousands of people who showed up to a demonstration in 2012 were motivated more by anti-neoliberal politics as opposed to by Québec nationalism. The point, however, is that these two currents significantly overlap even within the same person in Québec, and that the right wing is rather more identified with federalism (although the Parti Québécois would be correctly described at times as a right-wing, neoliberal political party).

### **Student associations in Québec: organizing a movement**

Since the 1968 student strike in Québec, there have been 11 general student strikes in Québec, including a first strike in 1968 and the one in 2012, which is the subject of this book. None have lasted as long as the 2012 strike, and the previous record was set in 2005. The longest gap separating two strikes has been nine years, with the

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shortest gap lasting only two years. With the exception of the 1968 strike, most student strikes in Québec have mobilized around two central sets of issues, namely tuition fees and student financial aid.

The effect of these mobilizations has been to keep university-level tuition fees relatively low in Québec, relative to fees in other Canadian provinces. Student financial aid also continues to be given in the form of a set amount of loans and a variable amount of (non-repayable) bursaries. The amount of bursaries given varies according to various factors including a student's income, but annual loans are capped according to the type of program one is enrolled in (CEGEP degree, Bachelor's degree, etc.) This limits the amount of student debt that is taken on, although the total aid given is very modest and keeps most students well below the poverty line.

The history of the student movement in Québec since 1968 has been one of increasing organization and institutionalization. The informally organized and just-recently politicized student associations of the 1960s suffered major setbacks after the 1970 October Crisis. During the 1970s and 1980s, various more institutionalized student associations were created, often with the involvement of far-left militants affiliated with Québec's strong Marxist-Leninist or Maoist organizations. This being said, not every student activist in Québec has been involved in far-left organizing at some point: the student movement is a movement for and in itself, and can most certainly constitute someone's primary source of involvement for up to a decade.

In 1983, the PQ government adopted legislation that allowed for the increased recognition of student associations by school administrations and the State. This legislation, which is still on the books, requires that university or CEGEP administrations collect student fees directly from students on behalf of student associations, thus providing the latter with a guaranteed and stable source of funding. This arrangement is similar to the automatic union dues collection system, known as the Rand formula in Canada, and which is present across the labour movement in North America. The result is that student unions in Québec benefit from a very stable institutional setting.

The student movement in Québec remained autonomous from political parties until the late 1980s or early 1990s. It was dominated by one militant organization, ANEEQ, throughout the 1970s and 1980s, until internal tensions between moderate activists and revolutionary militants eventually led to the dissolution of the organization in 1990. ANEEQ was organized according to the principles of combative syndicalism, or *syndicalisme de combat* in French. Relatively unknown outside of francophone countries, combative syndicalism is structured around two principles: democracy and constant mobilization.<sup>2</sup> According to this perspective, it is only through the mobilization of a union's membership in order to establish a permanent position of power against political opponents (employers, administrations, governments) that members, whether workers or students, can expect to improve

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<sup>2</sup> We are indebted to Alex Desrochers and Philippe Lapointe for this discussion of combative syndicalism in Québec.

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their conditions.<sup>3</sup> In order to be able to establish such a position, members must control the union, through the general assembly and direct democracy, since it is «only the control of the union by its members that allows them to get involved and become politicized.»<sup>4</sup> Such control and ownership would be difficult to exercise if student associations had tens of thousands of members (such as an entire university's student body). Consequently, smaller associations such as those of colleges and university faculties and departments are deemed preferable for organizing and engaging in combative action. General assemblies, debates, workshops, etc., must also be held regularly according to this philosophy, in order to empower members to take control of the issues that affect them. This emphasis on direct democracy also aims to counter the tendency of social organizations to bureaucratize themselves and move closer to the established political order.

The hegemony of this political perspective within the student movement suffered a major set back in the late 1980s, as a much more politically moderate tendency began to consolidate itself by channeling a reaction against a wave of unsuccessful student strikes that were only separated from each other by a few years in that decade. Students (some of which may have been affiliated with the Parti Québécois' youth wing) created what later became FEUQ and FECQ, two federations representing student unions at the university and CEGEP levels respectively. These federations were originally based on the premise that

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<sup>3</sup> Piotte, Jean-Marc, *Le syndicalisme de combat*, Montreal, Éditions coopératives Albert Saint-Martin, 1977, p.28.

<sup>4</sup> Piotte, *op. cit.*, p. 30. Our translation.

strikes should never happen again under their purview, although later on in the 2000s, these organizations would become involved in organizing student strikes.

In 1996, the Parti Québécois government decided to raise university tuition fees as part of a sweeping shift towards austerity and neoliberalism after the defeat of the second independence referendum in 1995. A coalition of institutionalized student organizations and looser, affinity-based activist groups joined forces and organized the *Mouvement pour le droit à l'éducation*, which led a successful three-week strike against the proposed fee-hike. This organization nevertheless fell apart amidst disagreements over the power given to affinity groups relative to student unions representatives empowered by their general assemblies to speak on behalf of a given membership.

This very issue was addressed during the creation of the *Association pour une solidarité syndicale étudiante* (ASSÉ, or, the Association for solidarity among student unions) in 2001, amidst a global context of anti-globalization activism and counter-summits such as the one in Québec City the same year. The newly created organization did not include student affinity groups within its structures. Instead, only student unions adhering to certain basic principles and in which the general assembly is the highest decision-making bodies could adhere. The creation of this association marked the resurgence of syndicalisme de combat model as a force within the student movement in Québec. It is important to stress that ASSÉ was created both in reaction to the politically regressive student federations, FECQ and FEUQ (as demonstrated by their willingness to negotiate with governments almost at any

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cost, the careerism exhibited by their leaders, their lack of democratic decision-making, their loose but limiting ties to the PQ and the nationalist movement, and their exclusive focus on ‘student’ issues at the expense of a broad understanding of society)—*as well as* in response to the power of voluntary-membership, affinity-based groups within the student movement of the 1990s.

A major successful strike was organized in 2005 by a coalition created by ASSÉ (CASSÉE) against a Liberal Party government decision to cut \$103 million from the student financial aid system. This strike is discussed at length in Xavier Lafrance’s chapter in this volume, and we won’t delve too deep into it here. Shortly afterwards, in the early fall of 2007, the Liberal government announced that the freeze on tuition fees that had been in effect since 1996 would be cancelled. The subsequent strike was unsuccessful at spreading beyond UQÀM and a few CEGEPs that are typically more politically active, in part because there had been only a few weeks or days of mobilization before strike votes were held in general assemblies (most student strikes in Québec have started during the winter semester to give people time to mobilize during the Fall). The strike petered out after a school-wide occupation at CEGEP du Vieux Montréal was heavily repressed by police (see Jaouad Laaroussi’s chapter). In spite of this failed attempt, it was already expected at this point that an even larger fee increase would be announced by the Liberal government before the fall of 2012; student activists started talking about a strike in the winter of 2012. This possibility became more and more concrete when the Liberal government was reelected again in 2007 and in 2008, at which point it won a parliamentary majority

that would have allowed it to govern for at least four more years—had it not called early elections in 2012 in a last-ditch attempt to undermine a massive student strike.

### **Working towards the 2012 student strike**

Now that the stage has been set to understand the background of our subject matter, let us turn to the introductory scenes of what culminated in the spring of 2012. By 2012, the Liberal government had been in power for twelve years. In addition to the opposition it faced for being an outspokenly federalist and right-wing party, the Liberal government was resented by a broad swath of public sector workers in Québec for having imposed special legislation during collective bargaining in order to impose contracts and avoid negotiating with striking workers, most infamously in 2005.

The issue of corruption and ties to organized crime was also an extremely prominent backdrop to the entire strike, as mainstream media reported on the findings of the Charbonneau commission, a public inquiry headed by a judge that continued to unearth widespread political party funding violations at the time of writing. The Liberal Party of Québec was deeply involved, it would seem, in illegal political funding mechanisms involving organized crime. No doubt many people who attended the numerous mass demonstrations in 2012 were primarily motivated by the desire to oust a corrupt political party from power.

Occupy Montreal, which despite its flaws was one of the longest-lasting Occupy movements in Canada, mobilized public sentiment against the government and its

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austerity measures as early as October 2011. The Coalition Against Privatization and User Fees (*Coalition opposée à la tarification et à la privatisation des services publics*) and various feminist and community organizations were also mobilizing against proposed hikes to fees for public daycares, against a mandatory flat health tax to be imposed on all taxpayers across the board, and against increases to household hydroelectricity bills, to name just a few recently announced austerity measures.

In the immediate context of the student movement, the impetus to strike was confirmed in spring 2010, when the Liberal government first mentioned concrete plans to disinvest in higher education and increase student fees to make up the difference, starting in 2012-2013. Organizing built up when the amount of the fee hike was announced: \$1625 per year for in-province students over 5 years, or a 75% increase over the 2011-2012 fees. A few years after from the short-lived and unsuccessful strike of 2007, the student movement was now ready for a large-scale mobilization, and the proposed hike was outrageous enough to bring together its different factions.

A student strike as conceived of by many student federations and associations is essentially a lobbying exercise for a change in policy. As such, arguments against and alternatives to the tuition hike were developed, most notably by the left-wing think-tank IRIS (see glossary.) Although the positions espoused by the FECQ, FEUQ, and ASSÉ differed, much of the argumentation against the hike focused on rebutting the idea of students needing to pay their «fair share», as the government insisted. Teach-in and mobilization materials maintained that education

was a public good which should be government funded, and proposed a progressive tax as a more equitable way of recapturing the individual benefits of education. Building off the critiques that previous strikes had developed about Québec's student financial aid system, those who opposed the hike also underlined that increasing loans and bursaries to compensate for a fee hike, as the government promised it would do, was an inadequate solution that did not make education truly accessible and which disproportionately burdened poorer students with debt

While striking was often presented as a last resort option to be used when all other strategies (i.e. petitions, protests, office occupations, one-day strikes) had failed, it was also understood by many to be the near-inevitable result of months of mobilizing and preparation in the face of a government that would cede nothing until something was at stake. In order to reach this expected end-point, a series of escalating pressure tactics were planned and carried out, from an occupation of the Minister of Education's Montreal office in September 2010 to teach-ins, days of action involving day- to week-long 'symbolic' strikes<sup>5</sup> and large demonstrations, banner drops, and blockades. The numbers kept growing: eighty students occupying an office. Twelve thousand students demonstrating. Twenty-five thousand students on strike, sixty thousand on strike.

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<sup>5</sup> The term symbolic is used to denote the fact that shorter strikes do not create a tangible amount of pressure on the provincial government to attempt to negotiate with student unions in order to come to a resolution. The factors that make longer student strikes an economic pressure tactic are discussed below.

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A national student gathering was called in May 2011, bringing together members of FECQ, FEUQ, ASSÉ and independent student unions to agree on a strategy for the 2012 strike. Important non-denunciation agreements came out of that meeting, which would give the strike strength when the terrain got rough in late spring of the following year. These resolutions prohibited any national student organization from denouncing another one's strategy or actions in the context of the strike. In exchange, it was resolved that the national unions would be prohibited from explicitly recommending a government offer to their membership (a decision aimed at preventing a repeat of the FEUQ executive's enthusiastic and successful acceptance of a regressive government offer during the 2005 strike), and that any organization would be prohibited from negotiating without the presence of all the other national student organizations, again, as the student federations did in 2005.

Subsequent to this meeting, a few key CEGEP associations that were affiliated with the college-level federation FECQ began pressuring their executive to distance itself from their more moderate and collaborationist sister organization at the university level, FEUQ. Some FECQ member associations also began attending ASSÉ or CLASSE congresses in the Fall of 2011, and a few, like the one in Saint Félicien, even joined the militant tendency within the organized student movement (see Guillaume Néron's chapter). These internal dissensions within FECQ, as well as the May 2011 meeting, probably helped temper any temptation on the part of FEUQ to negotiate without the rest of the student movement during the strike. As we will see, FEUQ chose not to do this in 2012,

unlike in 2005—a significant step forward for the student movement.

Finally, on November 10, 2011, more than two hundred thousand students went on strike and thirty thousand braved icy rain to take to the streets of Montreal for a national day of action meant to show the willingness of the student body to go on strike indefinitely. It was the first of many ultimatums that would mark the timeline of the strike, as well as the largest student protest in Québec since the 2005 student strike.

### *The logistics of striking*

In order to understand how the strike unfolded it is necessary to understand the basics of the organized student movement in Québec. At present, there are four national organizations to which local unions can affiliate: FECQ, FEUQ, ASSÉ and TaCEQ, a smaller player which was less active in organizing during the strike. ASSÉ was mostly subsumed during the strike into CLASSE, the larger coalition it built that brought together ASSÉ member unions, independent student unions, and even dissident local associations affiliated to FECQ. In keeping with ASSÉ's commitment to direct democracy and its usual practices, the governing bodies of the CLASSE were its congresses, held as often as every weekend during the strike, as well as local unions' general assemblies.

For those unfamiliar with the concept, a general assembly (GA) is a meeting open to all members of a given student union (albeit only to its members). In most of the student

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unions in Québec—and in all of the member unions of CLASSE—the GA is the ultimate decision making body. General assemblies can take up motions on any subject, though their functioning is typically bound by a set of rules (i.e. the Code Morin, which is Quebecois equivalent of Robert's Rules). Decisions taken in a general assembly then bind the union as an organization—especially the executive of the union, but also its committees—to carry out the relevant decision. In principle, therefore, the union executive is essentially in charge of the day-to-day functioning of the union, but not of its political direction. (In practice, members of the executive often exercise a great deal of political discretion.) However, during strikes, it is very common for associations to create 'strike councils' that meet up to once every day, in order to increase the organization of the membership and to serve as a forum to debate the day-to-day organization of the strike in an even more democratic manner.

Though typically general assemblies are regularly held but sparsely attended, during the strike the average attendance rate gravitated around 40% and in some cases rose as high as 60%. In unions on strike, general assemblies were held weekly to renew the strike and to take up any other relevant issues. In some cases general assemblies provided a forum for information-sharing, teach-ins, and debate on topics relevant to the motions. General assemblies also presented a new form of democratic engagement and a way to live out the ideals the movement was fighting for (Vincent Roy and David Clément's chapters both address some of these points). Attendance at GAs was the highest in student unions with a strong and established culture of democracy, particularly in urban CEGEPs that were

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members of CLASSE and in university associations in the arts, humanities and social sciences. For the most part, campuses and associations that did not exercise direct democracy through general assemblies were not able to mobilize their members on a massive scale and/or did not take part in the strike.<sup>6</sup>

It is equally important to recognize that GAs could be highly charged spaces that weren't conducive to debate and learning, by creating overly bureaucratic hurdles to a transformative form of deliberation. They could be spaces in which interpersonal dynamics enacted and enforced power relations, thus silencing already marginalized voices.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, general assemblies were most students' entry point into the strike. Weekly 'local' GAs were the central space where students voted on various issues of both local (i.e. campus-specific) and provincial import, including participation in or organization of demonstrations, movement strategy and other political actions and positions. They were also where students voted on the pivotal question of whether or not to undertake, and continue, an unlimited general strike. In order to encourage rank and file members to get involved in carrying out the GA's decisions, open, informal committees were created, where finer points were discussed and motions were put into practice.

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<sup>6</sup> This discussion of direct democracy owes much to Rushdia Mehreen and Hugo Bonin.

<sup>7</sup> In certain more progressive student unions, mechanisms such as gender balance in speaking turns and preference given to first time speakers have been put in place to encourage minority voices and discourage dominant voices from monopolizing the general assembly time.

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At the provincial level, CLASSE's positions reflected those taken by member associations in their own general assemblies, which were often circulated prior to CLASSE Congresses by each union through the CLASSE email list, and then voted on by delegates from all the member unions at these Congresses. Although Congress attendees were delegates in the true sense—mandated only to represent the positions taken by their union—the Congresses were far from a simple vote-tallying exercise. Debate, collaboration, and revision were common as the decision-making body struggled to come to nuanced positions, and to define the direction taken by a vast and multi-pronged social movement. Information about upcoming actions was distributed and organizers met like-minded people with whom ideas were hatched. Just as local union executives are bound to enact their GAs' mandates, CLASSE executives would then coordinate the process of carrying out the plan voted on by the Congress with the help of standing committees and members at large.<sup>8</sup> In the end, it was left up to the CLASSE spokesperson to distill the hours of deliberation and disagreement into soundbites for the mainstream media, with the mixed results one might expect. This process of intermediation between a democratic mass movement's complexity and the expectations imposed by journalists was a major point of contention within CLASSE, as exemplified by numerous

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<sup>8</sup> By the end of the strike, CLASSE's Social Struggles Committee had resigned in protest, leaving in doubt whether direct democracy practices and delegation to ad-hoc committees suffice to combat systemic forms of oppression, or the marginalization of the struggles against these forms of oppression.

motions to censure the organization's spokespeople during the strike.

In the same way that demands and action plans were decided in a bottom-up fashion, any requests or communication to CLASSE coming from the government was also discussed by the movement's base. In April 2012, when the government imposed the condemnation of 'violence' as a precondition to joining in negotiations between the government and student associations, the two federations (FECQ and FEUQ) issued statements condemning violence within a few days, but CLASSE waited for its members to take a position on violence in their own general assemblies. Based on the GA mandates, the position of CLASSE on violence was discussed, debated and formulated at a Congress that spent most of the allotted time on this specific question. This moment revealed how the practice, and time-frame, of direct democracy was itself a disruption of State mechanisms that expect hierarchy and expediency above all else.

Direct democracy was upheld by members of CLASSE as one of the pillars of the student movement, with picket lines and even sometimes economic disruptions justified by the fact that a majority of students (in a specific faculty or CEGEP campus) had voted to strike. Assemblies were also used as a mobilization tool, under the assumption that when members were involved in making decisions they would subsequently feel responsible to take part in carrying them out. However, it is important to recognize that many of the people who lent strength to the movement acted on their own behalf: ad hoc groups such as Professors Against the Hike, Parents Against the Hike, as well as artists,

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individual protestors, students from institutions not on strike, anarchist affinity groups, and others who were not represented in the official numbers of students on strike yet shaped the movement in the streets.

### *A timeline of the strike*

In order to contextualize the chapters to come, we chose to provide something between an exhaustive timeline and a sketch of the way the strike unfolded, with major milestones highlighted. Although the architecture of the Québec student movement is necessary to understanding references throughout this book, the most exciting and inspiring elements of this movement are not the structures that framed it, but the moments lived in the streets, in general assemblies, at art happenings, in late-night organizing meetings and early-morning direct action meet-ups, in bars and student lounges and in cramped living rooms.

In late January and early February 2012, after the resounding silence with which the government responded to the November 10th, 2011 day of action, student unions in CLASSE began to adopt mandates for an unlimited general strike (*grève générale illimitée*), to begin when a certain number of other unions representing a certain minimum number of students had adopted similar mandates.<sup>9</sup> On February 13th 2012, the day a minimum

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<sup>9</sup> This is a common device in Québec as the student movement gears up for a general strike: associations vote to go on strike only as soon as a minimum number of other associations have as strike mandate. For example, one association's resolution could have read that at least five associations with a total membership of 10,000 students

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number of associations had voted to begin a strike, an impromptu snake demo wound through the streets of Montreal. The strike had begun!

With classes blocked or cancelled, striking students found themselves with time on their hands. Much was made of the fact that although students were not attending class, they were still expected to keep up with their academic work for when the strike ended, so the time was filled with read-ins, sit-ins, teach-ins, even a bring-your-own-chair moving classroom in the streets. Meanwhile, the number of students on strike continued to climb as higher strike ceilings were reached and more student unions voted to join the strike. A national demonstration on February 22nd drew thousands to the streets of Montreal, and those who attended on a one-day strike returned to their student unions full of enthusiasm and hoping to vote on a longer strike mandate.

As the number of students on strike grew, so did the pressure on the government to respond. The logic of a student strike is that in a primarily government-funded system, the cost of a cancelled semester—and thus a double cohort entering schools the following year—is simply too great for the government to accept. The strike thus takes on the air of a giant game of ‘chicken’, with students gambling their semester with the historically justified expectation that the government will be the first to give in. Given strict guidelines on the number of classroom hours

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had to have a similar strike mandate before its own strike could be launched. This helps to prevent situations in which smaller or more militant associations are on strike for weeks while waiting for others to join, and helps start the strike with a bang.

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required for CEGEP programs to be recognized, and the amount of summer leave to be granted to unionized CEGEP professors, the government's leeway to let a strike continue indefinitely is somewhat restrained.

In light of these parameters and previous experiences, a tentative timeline called for the apex of the strike to occur in late March, with a joint demonstration called by the FECQ, FEUQ, and CLASSE on March 22nd (incidentally, the anniversary of the start of Paris' May 1968). Many FEUQ-affiliated unions planned on taking short strike mandates for that day or week. As time wore on, however, the government continued to refuse to even recognize the strike, ignoring it entirely or referring to a «boycott» of classes. In a context where the most common types of activity were awareness-raising actions and demonstrations that criss-crossed the streets of Montreal and Québec City without profoundly affecting the flow of goods and people, the CLASSE Congress called for a week of economic disruptions starting mid-March, in order to build pressure in the lead-up to the 22nd.

At this point our story becomes increasingly interesting and complex. The call for economic disruptions, followed by a growing call for a social strike,<sup>10</sup> opened up space for autonomous action. When the expected *denouement* did not occur after March 22nd, a carefully studied set of expectations based on previous strikes fell apart. The economic disruptions—in the form of early morning blockades or disruptions of capitalist gatherings—increased in terms of tactical ingenuity and disruptive power: sometimes multiple *manifestions* (direct actions organized

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<sup>10</sup> A 'social strike' is imagined to include workers as well students.

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by a small group of people in which most participants only know what the action is when they show up) were called on the same morning, either reinforcing each other or acting to divide the heightened police attention. By now, demonstrators had learned to carry bandanas and Maalox against pepper spray, and knew all too well the sound of batons rattling on shields that heralded an imminent charge by riot cops. Mornings in Montreal became the scene of daily confrontations between cops and strikers.

Despite the controversy these early-morning demos sparked, March 22nd was attended by a historically unprecedented number of people: approximately two hundred thousand people took to the streets in Montreal, including students, supporters, and others opposed to the Charest government. Plans were made for a repeat at the annual Earth Day demonstration, scheduled to happen exactly a month later (thus initiating a series of mass demonstrations occurring on the 22nd of each month, the last of which was on September 22nd, 2012 and the largest of which was on May 22nd). Meanwhile, 'creative' actions continued apace, drawing those unwilling to brave 7am meet-ups, or those already recovered from the early morning's exertions.

By mid-April, the strike had lasted two months in some student associations and Montreal's strikers had four weeks of economic disruptions worn into their running shoes. In his chapter, Joël Pedneault recounts how, furious at the government's reaction (which had only evolved from silence to taunts), at the daily police violence, at the looming spectre of a lost semester, and at the arrogance of holding a display of colonial and capitalist aggression

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in the centre of an embattled city, students joined with anti-colonial activists, anarchists, and other anti-austerity demonstrators to attack a Northern Development job fair and networking event, in what turned into a memorable riot in downtown Montreal. A week later, the government announced its willingness to negotiate: as long as the student organizations denounced «violence» and agreed to a 3-day «truce» during the negotiations.

On the second day of these negotiations, a nighttime demonstration was called, representing the growing segment of the strike movement that wanted nothing to do with a negotiated settlement or anything less... a tuition freeze, free tuition, the end of capitalism, you name it, and wanted even less to accept a «truce,» whether imposed unilaterally by the government or by any self-appointed leaders of the strike. In other words, the movement declared itself ungovernable. In response, the Minister of Education held CLASSE responsible for the broken truce and negotiations broke down. A second night demo was called, with thousands of people filling the streets of Montreal with righteous anger, chants, and eventually a bonfire in the middle of an intersection in the Latin Quarter of Montreal. Thus begins the next phase of the strike. With early morning militant actions continuing, and days already filled with symbolic actions, strategy sessions, debriefs, and general assemblies, a crowd of people gathered in Montreal at 8:30 pm every night to march through the streets together. Sometimes windows were broken and paint was spattered, sometimes the police kettled the demonstrators early, and sometimes the demos turned into long meandering walks through Montreal's central neighbourhoods, waving to residents with red

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squares hanging from their balconies and bar patrons who either chanted along or yelled insults, all depending. At times, the night demonstrations grew to include tens of thousands of people.

The following weeks are marked by increasingly numerous injunctions against picket lines being imposed on various CEGEPs and institutions (and the exhausting physical resistance to them as people continue to hold hard picket lines in spite of police repression), a riotous May 1st anti-capitalist demo, and a counter-summit protest on May 4th outside the Liberal party's congress in Victoriaville. The latter is met with such police violence that several people have to be hospitalized, hovering between life and death because of wounds inflicted by plastic bullets.

During this demonstration, student negotiators from all four national student organizations are in Québec City, meeting with government representatives and, surprisingly, the presidents of the three major labour unions federations in Québec. Pressure from the labour leaders and the effects of dozens of consecutive hours spent in meetings push the student representatives into accepting a terrible deal, which is ultimately rejected by the local general assemblies in the following week.<sup>11</sup> It becomes evident that no one knows how this strike will end, and that the government is willing to defend the fee hike at whatever cost. Supporting

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<sup>11</sup> The fact that this was a significant setback to the government's plans, and that the strike continued in spite of an offer being made, is a testament to the level of organization achieved by Québec's student movement at that point in time, and of the that power general assemblies had to determine the pace of events during this period.

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the students' cause is becoming an unpopular risk to take, and calls to organize a social strike on May 1st and then May 15th go unanswered except among employees of some community groups. Meanwhile, some student activists have been barred from the island of Montreal, or from attending demonstrations, while awaiting trial (this topic is further developed in Section VI: Organizing Against Repression).

On May 10th, homemade smoke bombs are dropped at various stations in the Montreal métro/subway system, leading to accusations of terrorism (although no one was in any danger of being injured by these smoke bombs, unlike the numerous demonstrators at this point who have experienced broken limbs, traumatic head injuries, and more.) By the end of the week, the Minister of Education resigned, and her successor introduced a special law in the legislature, the infamous Bill 78, later known as Law 12 once it is adopted by the National Assembly of Québec.

Ironically, this bill, which was aimed at stopping all protest, breathes life back into the movement. Civil libertarians and supporters who'd watched in the sidelines quickly organized *casseroles*, which involved banging pots and pans, sometimes with kids in tow, sometimes on balconies, sometimes by the hundreds in a local public plaza. The movement becomes more broadly anti-Charest, anti-Liberal Party and anti-repression, and begins to shift out of the student unions—which now faced heavy penalties if they so much as endorse violations of the law—and into autonomous neighbourhood assemblies (APAQs), in addition to the existing affinity groups and collectives.

Three solid months of striking take their toll, however, and between the furtive nature of organizing under Law 12, the lack of a clear target, and the economic necessities that send students to work (sometimes outside the province) or back home for the summer, the energy of the strike has nearly petered out. In addition, in the context of Law 12, administrations closed academic institutions in order to «reduce» tensions on campus. This undermined students' access to common gathering spaces, limiting them to the outside of buildings. The annual arrival of the Formula One Grand Prix in June, with its orgy of capitalist and sexist excess, environmental costs... and its importance to the city's image, presents a last opportunity for economic disruption—and some perceive it as a dress rehearsal for when the strike «picks up» again with the return to school in August, according again to the provisions laid out by Law 12.

Several actions during the Grand Prix aimed to disrupt and denounce various characteristics of the event; a naked march, for example, highlighted the sexism that reigned in all of the cosmopolitan events around the arrival of the F1. The actions surrounding the F1 Grand Prix demonstrate the evolution of the student conflict and the broader social and systemic critique that shaped the movement. A strike that originally focused on the tuition hike transformed into a much larger struggle for a more just society. Chapters throughout this volume touch on the intensity of surveillance and policing enacted during that weekend, a climate that—it turns out—remained in place throughout that summer and into the following year.

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We mentioned that the strike began to peter out in May 2012. Two chapters in this book (by Guillaume Néron and Vincent Roy) show that the strike was indeed more short-lived in some places in Québec outside Montreal. Student general assemblies stopped renewing strike mandates early in May 2012 in the two towns where they organized, well *before* the special law came into effect or any early provincial elections were announced. Why this was the case remains an open question. The dozens of local court injunctions that preceded Law 12 and made student picket lines illegal were no doubt a part of this equation. While these court injunctions were in many cases successfully resisted (but not always, as Guillaume Néron mentions), they may have accelerated the end of the strike by putting a negative pressure on the weekly strike renewal assemblies. Anti-strike injunctions may have created a sense on some campuses that defeat would come sooner or later and that the enemy had too many means at its disposal.

Perhaps, as well, the sense of being a part of a growing social uprising that was rapidly veering off the path taken by previous strikes and mobilizations, which was so present in major cities like Montreal, was much weaker elsewhere. The course of the strike no longer followed the 'usual' expectations about the timeline a strike was supposed to follow as soon as the March 22nd mass demonstration had no effect on government policy. As a result, non-metropolitan student associations may have been more open to demobilization, because expectations based on ideas about how previous student strikes, such as the one in 2005, had unfolded became of little use in the new context of repression.

Indeed, after a certain point in time, the realization we were a part of the longest student strike in the history of Québec (the previous record having been set at around 8 weeks), and that no end was in sight, changed many things. As we have seen, it opened up new possibilities for many, but it also acted as a discouraging factor for people who had favoured the strike to a point, but lost hope when faced with a perceived lack of results and an increasingly unpredictable and heavily repressed movement they may have thought would win come May. Coming to an understanding of the causes of this first wave of demobilization, which occurred prior to the special law and elections being called, will be important to organizing even more powerful strikes in the future.

### **The Aftermath: missed opportunities during the movement**

Was the strike a success? For many of us in Québec, the question bears heavily on our collective conscience. Jean Charest's Liberal party was indeed overthrown, and their planned tuition hikes cancelled, but in many cases the same policies have simply been repackaged and presented under different names by their successors in the Parti Québécois. For some, the Québec Spring and its aftermath have highlighted the limits of naming and targeting easily identifiable, individual heroes and villains of a struggle—despite the power that a «good guys/bad guys» formula can lend to any mobilization. While former FECQ spokesman Léo Bureau-Blouin was inspired to run as a candidate for the Parti Québécois, helping his party to secure a minority victory in fall 2012 elections, most other

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student activists have come to question social and political structures and systems of society that were previously taken for granted, and to think seriously about how they may be re-envisioned.

This book is also, then, an attempt to grapple with the complexity of the Québec movement, with all its successes as well as missed opportunities. The current post-strike climate calls for new and more complicated narratives that will broaden and deepen our analyses. Students and activists have been socialized by the systems that in many cases we wish to deconstruct and rebuild or destroy—how do we remain self-reflexive and constantly work to root out the oppression within our organizations and our selves? How do we build horizontal social movements that resist competitive individualism, for example, and include mechanisms for resisting the glorification of charismatic leaders? How can we disrupt normalized hierarchies such as those of race, class and gender, and facilitate the meaningful integration into mass movements of those who are silenced and marginalized in our societies? Despite the successes of CLASSE and the strategy of direct democracy in bringing and holding together a massive student strike, critiques point to the significant challenges that these questions posed for the coalition, the association (ASSÉ), and for the movement as a whole.

The need for the integration of an anti-oppressive, feminist, anti-colonial, anti-racist analysis has been raised repeatedly—although such considerations were seen by many student activists as divisive and/or as secondary struggles that only concerned particular affinity groups (such as queer students or people of colour), rather

than being integral aspects of the movement. Some of the popular chants heard on the street reflected this shortcoming, failing to recognize for example, the colonialism implicit in the call and response «Whose Québec? Our Québec!» and infectious sing-a-long «Tout est à nous, rien n'est à eux; tout ce qu'ils ont ils l'ont volé» (Everything is ours, nothing is theirs; everything they have they've stolen); or the sexism of the gendered mockery of then-Education Minister Line Beauchamp. The re-emergence, in the form of street theatre performed during demonstrations, of the metaphoric identification of Québec's working class and poor as «nègres blancs»—«white niggers»—coined by Québécois hero Pierre Vallières' autobiographical *White Niggers of America* (1970), alienated and outraged members of Black and other communities of colour; while chants mocking the Montreal police (SPVM) as the «SSPVM» accompanied by students marching with outstretched arms (as in Nazi salutes) stimulated condemnation of the students rather than of the police force. CLASSE spokesperson Gabriel Nadeau Dubois hinted that additional revenue generated through natural resource extraction and the development of northern Québec—at the expense of Indigenous communities— could be applied to educational funding as an alternative to tuition hikes (see the chapter by Joël Pedneault, in Section V). Inconsistent framing left the student movement open to dismissive criticism and accusations, and limited students' ability to build common ground across communities. It led to contradictions and problems in the movement's politics: for instance,

Ultimately, it is only through critical reflection and analysis that we can build stronger movements in the future.

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We hope that this book calls attention to the importance of inclusive, intersectional approaches to movement building that incorporate and continue to develop critiques of capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy, and racism as we—in Québec, Canada, North America, and elsewhere across the globe—fight against neoliberalism and struggle to build stronger, more sustainable communities and societies.

### **Post-strike organizing**

#### *After the strike*

While the content of this book focuses on the movement that developed between February and June of 2012, the strike did not officially end until early September, when the last student unions with strike mandates voted not to renew their strikes in light of the recently-elected PQ government's promise to cancel the tuition hike and abolish Law 12. During the summer, with campuses closed and student associations silenced by Law 12, neighbourhood popular assemblies (*Assemblées populaires autonomes de quartier*, or APAQs) formed and became the centre of resistance. In some cases, the APAQs provided a framework for long-time activists to come together on a neighbourhood basis, while in others they attracted a broader crowd. Most had at least one or two student members, and thus links to the organized student movement, though the majority of participants were not students.

As a result, action not only dwindled over the summer and became less militant, but also became broader in scope (though opposition to Law 12 and the Charest

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government stayed strong), as well as more dispersed throughout the city. Night demonstrations ranging from a couple dozen die-hards to hundreds of participants made their presence felt at Montreal's summer festivals, but the air of daily street battles disappeared. And then, in late July, the Liberal government called elections for the month of September. The movement found itself suddenly facing the possibility that its named opponent could be gone from power in a few weeks, and (too) many activists and supporters turned their attention to the battle box.

Meanwhile, the return to classes loomed, and the student movement was left to restart a strike with none of its usual spaces accessible for mobilization. There is a reason most student strikes in Québec's history have taken place in the second, winter semester: it takes months of on-campus presence to prepare a strike and build the sense of solidarity that allows students to vote for a strike in full confidence that it will be effectively enforced. With student unions officially silenced, with students away from interpersonal networks, and with administrations ordering students not to strike, the possibility for remobilization was low. Léo Bureau-Blouin, the FECQ spokesperson turned PQ candidate, began to call for unions to suspend the strike until after the elections, and others soon echoed this demobilizing plan.

In the end, despite efforts to bring together APAQs and pro-strike activists from campuses still on break to form the sort of hard picket lines that had been seen against the injunctions, strike votes failed with no police confrontation at all of the CEGEPs that had been on strike through the summer. In addition to the general

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demobilization, three factors are important to recognize for future organizing: first, the fact that the returns to classes (and strike GAs) were cleverly staggered by the government so the most moderate came first, with the result that each failing GA demobilized the next. Second, in each case, the first day of classes was cancelled in order to allow students to attend the GA, reinforcing the sense of business as usual and preventing the clashes between strikers and police that might have been enough of a show of strength to give the sense that a strike could and should be defended again. Finally, controversially, more radical members of the movement have pointed to the obsession with the appearance of democracy as essentially paralyzing. The fact that even the most determined opponents of the hikes bowed to the demand that GAs run their course and have their outcomes respected shows the power of the organised student movement, which draws its legitimacy from majority rule, even over autonomous actors who drew the legitimacy of their actions from ideals of social justice and on-the-ground organizing.

The picture was somewhat different on university campuses. With the support of professors who were furious at the administration's treatment of them, the return to classes at the Université de Montreal was marked by strong resistance—and an even stronger police presence, with the provincial police (SQ) setting up temporary headquarters on campus and holding students in classrooms. Nonetheless, within a few days the resistance was arguably moot as Pauline Marois' victory speech included a promise to cancel the proposed hike. The respite was brief, however. Once in power, the PQ government announced a summit on post-secondary education to be held in

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February 2013, in order to discuss university governance, the involvement of the private sector, tuition fees, and other contentious matters. The process leading up to it was shrouded in secrecy and ever-changing information: in the end, four brief thematic meetings were held with student, administration, government and private sector representatives. Student demonstrators who tried to enter these closed-door meetings were met with locked doors and pepper spray, and with the meetings held in out-of-the-way locations, their presence went largely unremarked. The summit itself, ever-shrinking in both scope and time, eventually consisted of an 8-hour day and a short morning session (timed so as not to coincide with the demonstration called for that afternoon), at which an annual three percent tuition hike was announced and termed a «tuition freeze indexed to inflation» despite the fact that inflation has not been as high as 3% in years.

Since then, the PQ government has implemented some of the less popular hikes and fees announced by the previous Liberal government. Unfortunately, 2013's resistance was minimal, echoing a trend of extremely weak anti-austerity/anti-government activism since the end of the strike. The reasons for this ebb are unclear and likely multiple. Contributing factors include post-strike burnout and exhaustion, as well as the criminalization of many strikers; a lack of unifying cause and a scattering of activist attention between different issues and locations; and the Québécois nation-building and electoral processes that led many who gladly attacked Charest and the Liberals to be more wary of criticizing the Party Québécois.

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But these are not the only factors weakening what has traditionally been an active protest culture, especially in Montreal. Police repression of activism has remained high even as activist strength has dropped. Montreal's protest-quashing bylaw P-6 (discussed by Jérémie Dhavernas in section VI) remains on the books and is used by the SPVM to kettle and ticket any march that seems the slightest bit radical. Police tactics developed during the strike are deployed regularly, while riot police are now an ever-present sight at any potentially political outdoor gathering. More people have been arrested in the context of mass arrests during protests after the end of the strike than during the strike itself.

Repression is equally perpetuated at the campus level, with the most blatant examples being the announcement by the administration at UQAM—traditionally an epicentre of student activism—that the area containing student union offices was being renovated effective immediately, with walls appearing overnight to block off access. The renovations have included whitewashing years' worth of activist graffiti murals, reducing the number of access points, and installing many new security cameras. Elsewhere, university budgets cuts and other austerity measures represent a more insidious form of backlash whose effects are only starting to appear.

### *Looking to the future*

The long term impacts of the 2012 student movement—both for the geopolitical context and for the people who made it happen—remain to be seen. Nonetheless, coming as it does nearly two years after the conclusion of the strike, this book can start to outline some of these trends

and lingering questions. This is by no means an exhaustive list, and part of the hope of this book is to launch another set of ripples through sister activist communities and continue to build an ongoing legacy for this book.

Already, student activists across Canada, the US, England and Scotland are looking to the lessons that can be drawn from the Québec strike to strengthen their own struggles. It will fall to them to distill what works in their own specific contexts, but a careful study of the 2012 movement alongside the Québec social and political context can provide hints to what is transposable and what is not. Long-time student activists make the point that the strike movement that we have built in Québec is not an affinity-based movement. What allowed the strike to reach its strength in numbers and become such a lasting movement was that it was deeply anchored and institutionalized in a student union base (although organizing through affinity groups for disruptive actions gave the strike its firepower and was instrumental in radicalizing it). Activists in places lacking these structure should keep this context in mind when seeking to replicate the success of the 2012 student movement—although that does not mean that student activists' first priority should be to build a student syndicalist culture and an organizational structure along the lines of what exists in Québec—nor may this be a realistic goal, given the time required and the role of the Québec context in shaping what its student movement has become.

Beyond student activists, the 2012 Québec spring inspired many by showing a level of sustained popular resistance in North America that many had previously

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associated with distant times or places. Whether or not the spring of 2012 will eventually touch off a wave of anti-austerity and anti-capitalist mass movements remains to be seen, but as the experience of Québec's strikers—and those who came from elsewhere to participate—spreads across the continent, the possibility remains present.

Perhaps the most exciting and visible sequel to the movement, however, can be found in the Idle No More, the Indigenous women-led movement launched in late 2012 to challenge colonialism across Canada. Although its issues, scope, and demographics differ from the Québec Spring, several Idle No More organizers have pointed to the mass movement built around the student strike as both an inspiration and a sign of changed times.

In a similar vein, we hope that readers—wherever they are, in whatever movements they are positioned—will find in this volume some of the joy, exhilaration, rage, and transformative reflection we and our thousands of fellow strikers experienced over the past years.

In solidarity, happy reading!