

## Women's Centres in Québec : A Strong Base of Support for the Student Movement

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As the weeks of the student strike turned into the months of the Québec Spring, some student associations, community organizations and unions joined their efforts, forming the cross-sector "Red Hand Coalition" to increase pressure on the government. The Coalition urged their members to take part in "social strikes" on May 1st and May 15th, 2012, and on April 26, women's centres throughout Québec received a filmed statement prepared by the provincial organization, *Regroupement des centres de femmes du Québec*, announcing their intention to participate in the social strike. While shocking to some, the eloquent message convinced several centres to organize themselves to answer this call.

The first women's centres in Québec emerged in the early 1980s to respond to the strong desire expressed by activists to have their own places from which to work. There are now hundreds of organizations working to improve the lives of women who are members of the large network known formally as the *Regroupement des centres de femmes du Québec* or, more colloquially, "l'R." All of those in l'R adhere to common principles detailed in a "Basis of Political Unity", which lays out their feminist position and comprehensive approach to intervention.. The primary function of these groups is providing living

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environments that aim at breaking the isolation many women experience. They also offer various support services and educational activities, and they initiate and take part in political action. The greatest strength of these women's centres lies in the close relationships they facilitate with and between the women who are involved with them, and in the wide range of issues they address: violence, mental health, education, democracy, and resistance to poverty.

As a result of this basis of unity, the demand for an accessible education for everyone made by the student movement resonated with the women's centres. The women understood the proposed increase in university tuition fees to be part of a wider trend towards defunding of public social services. For the staff of *I/R*, what especially aroused indignation and inspired a sense of urgency to get involved in the strike was the ongoing police repression of the strikers and their allies. Police violence fuelled their anger along with mounting concerns that the current conflict had brought to the fore such as the privatization of health care, the Plan Nord, and rising electricity rates. As one employee said: "It was very emotional, we were fully occupied by this struggle. We had difficulty concentrating on our work... . Our mental health was in danger if we did not go into action."<sup>2</sup>

The women's centre in Longueuil, *Vie Nous V'elles*<sup>3</sup>, shared this indignation and promptly announced its intention to strike. In a statement issued on April 30, the

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<sup>2</sup> The testimonies quoted in this piece were collected by the author in the fall of 2012. Quotes were also pulled from the *Regroupement des centres de femmes du Québec* website.

<sup>3</sup> A play on words, can be read to say «new life.»

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centre denounced the attitude of the police, describing their actions as a threat to democracy: "When you silence young people and those who support them with clubs and tear gas canisters fired at close range, democracy is at risk."<sup>4</sup> Seeing beyond the proposed tuition fee increases, the centre also worried about the future of provincial social programs: "The debate opened by the student movement goes beyond the simple question of tuition: it suggests the need to reflect on the kind of society we want. Do we want a totalitarian state at the mercy of economic magnates? Or do we prefer a state that deserves its capital S to reflect that it is a progressive State that ensures the common good? Now is when these choices must be made."<sup>5</sup>

The call for a social strike received quick responses in all regions of Québec, and forty-five centres were mobilized. One reason for the mass response was that women's centres have always welcomed student interns—and some of the interns were very active in the movement, giving the centres direct access to information and to the sense of excitement stimulated by the growing mobilization. This helped other workers at the centres feel "personally touched" by the cause beyond the appeals on social networks and in traditional media.

The Shawinigan Women's Centre took the opportunity to denounce ongoing systemic sexism: "In earning on average just 71 per cent of what men earn in their lifetime, women are faced with greater economic burdens. And if

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<sup>4</sup>Vies Nous V'elles, «*Le mépris a assez duré: grève sociale*» (This contempt has lasted long enough: social strike), press release, April 30, 2012.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*

we consider the long-term, women will take much longer than men to repay student loans because of their lower average wages ..."<sup>6</sup> Women's centres in Montérégie responded by prioritizing popular political education for their members, including debates organized to clarify myths about the political left and right.<sup>7</sup> Choosing another approach, women's centres in the Bas-Saint-Laurent picketed the office of the Liberal MP for the riding of Rivière-du-Loup.<sup>8</sup>

In Montreal, a day of reflection and action took place on May 15, 2012. The Red Hand Coalition held a rally in rooms provided by the Centre-Sud Social Committee, a major centre of militancy in Montreal.<sup>9</sup> The event was facilitated by a representative from the Montreal women's centres and was very well attended. Representatives from ten women's centres in the region of Montreal and Laval were present. The atmosphere was electrifying as participants shared both their indignation and enthusiasm. This meeting also provided an opportunity to celebrate the courage, determination, creativity and openness of student associations with regard to their solidarity with union and community groups, inspiring the latter to participate in

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<sup>6</sup> Shawinigan Women's Centre, «*Le Centre de femmes de Shawinigan affiche son appui au mouvement étudiant*» (The Shawinigan Women's Centre expresses its support for the student movement), press release, May 1, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> *Regroupement des centres de femmes du Québec website*, www.rcentre.qc.ca

<sup>8</sup> «*Partout au Québec, des centres de femmes sont en grève dans la rue*» (Everywhere in Québec, women's centres are on strike and in the streets), press release, May 14, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Centre-Sud is a working-class neighbourhood east of downtown Montreal.

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the social strike and to take to the street alongside students. To conclude the day and as a way to protest the anti-mask law that had just come into force, participants were asked to gather in the afternoon for a political masquerade ball at Place Émilie-Gamelin in downtown Montreal.

*l'R* and its member groups were active in the spring mobilization beyond the social strikes they were called to support on May 1 and May 15. An intervention worker from a women's centre in the Petite-Patrie neighborhood of Montreal was one of the organizers of the highly visible group, *Mères en colère et solidaires*. She explained the reason this group was formed in these words: "When I took part in the student protests, I could not directly identify with young people. But as a mother, I feel involved in what they are experiencing ... Several of us felt anxiety and outrage at the violence that students were experiencing and wanted to support them concretely. Other people, activists and workers at women's centres, who were also concerned about how their children and future generations might lack access to university education, also joined the movement."

The Québec Spring encouraged a great deal of popular education among members of the province's women's centres, with some groups and individuals experiencing a sense of empowerment through participating in their first political event or going out in their neighborhood with pots and pans in hand.<sup>10</sup> However, when the student struggle was at its peak in May 2012, the participation of activists at the women's centres began to decline. It appeared that the harsh police repression at some rallies

<sup>10</sup> As part of the nightly «*casserole*» demonstrations.

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and demonstrations, such as occurred on May 4, 2012 at the Liberal Party congress in Victoriaville, may have cooled the passion of many participants. Following the tremendous violence in Victoriaville, some expressed fear that this scenario might occur again.

With the arrival of Pauline Marois as Prime Minister of Québec, plans to raise tuition fees were cancelled and Law 78 was abolished, providing some relief—as well as pride—for those, including the women's centres, who had demanded these changes. But in spite of these victories, other actions to counter the neoliberal policies that affect young people, women and the general population will clearly be necessary. Women's centres have been greatly inspired by the diversity and efficiency of the countless actions carried out during the student movement. Conversely, the students were able to rely on the unwavering support of women's centres throughout the spring. Given this successful collaboration and the clear convergence of interests that it illuminated, it is likely that other alliances between student activists and Québec's women's centres can be anticipated in the months and years to come.