

Share our Future: The CLASSE Manifesto

*La Coalition Large de l'Association pour une
Solidarité Syndicale Étudiante (CLASSE)¹*

For months now, all over Québec, the streets have vibrated to the rhythm of hundreds of thousands of marching feet. What started out as a movement underground, still stiff with the winter consensus, gathered new strength in the spring and flowed freely, energizing students, parents, grandparents, children, and people with and without jobs. The initial student strike grew into a people's struggle, while the problem of tuition fees opened the door to a much deeper malaise - we now face a political problem that truly affects us all. To find its remedy and give substance to our vision, let us cast our minds back to the root of the problem.

The way we see it, direct democracy should be experienced, every moment of every day. Our own voices ought to be heard in assemblies in schools, at work, in our neighbourhoods. Our concept of democracy places the people in permanent charge of politics, and by "the people" we mean those of us at the base of the pyramid - the foundation of political legitimacy. This becomes an opportunity for all those who are never heard. It is a time for women to speak up as equals and to raise issues that are too often ignored or simply forgotten about. The democracy we see does not make promises: it goes into action. Our democracy banishes cynicism, instead of fuelling it.

¹ The CLASSE Manifesto was adopted by a congress of delegates from CLASSE member unions on August 11-12, 2012. Translated by Rouge Squad.

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As we have shown many times over, our democracy brings people together. Each time we take to the streets and set up picket lines, it is this kind of democracy that at last breathes free. We are talking about shared, participatory democracy.

Democracy, as viewed by the other side, is tagged as "representative" - and we wonder just what it represents. This brand of "democracy" comes up for air once every four years, for a game of musical chairs. While elections come and go, decisions remain unchanged, serving the same interests: those of leaders who prefer the murmurs of lobbyists to the clanging of pots and pans. Each time the people raises its voice in discontent, on comes the answer: emergency laws, with riot sticks, pepper spray, tear gas. When the elite feels threatened, no principle is sacred, not even those principles they preach: for them, democracy works only when we, the people keep our mouths shut.

Our view is that truly democratic decisions arise from a shared space, where men and women are valued. As equals, in these spaces, women and men can work together to build a society that is dedicated to the public good.

We now know that equal access to public services is vital to the common good. And access can only be equal if it is free.

Free access does more than simply banish prices: it tears down the economic barriers to what we hold most dear. Free access removes the stumbling blocks to the full flowering of our status as humans. Where there is free access, we *share* payment for *shared* services.

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By contrast, the concept of price determination - the so-called "fair share" - is in truth no more than veiled discrimination. Under the supposedly consensual "user-payer" principle, a surtax is in fact charged to people whose needs are already at the bottom of the heap. Where is justice, when a hospital can charge the exact same fee from a lawyer as from a bag clerk? For the lawyer, the amount is minimal; for the bag clerk, it is a backbreaking burden.

This burden is one that we all shoulder, each and every one of us, whether we are students or not: this is one lesson our strike has taught us. For we, students, are also renters and employees; we are international students, pushed aside by discriminating public services. We come from many backgrounds, and, until the colour of our skin goes as unnoticed as our eye colour, we will keep on facing everyday racism, contempt and ignorance. We are women, and if we are feminists it is because we face daily sexism and roadblocks set for us by the patriarchal system; we constantly fight deep-rooted prejudice. We are gay, straight, bisexual, and proud to be. We have never been a separate level of society. Our strike is not directed against the people.

We are the people.

Our strike goes beyond the \$1625 tuition-fee hike. If, by throwing our educational institutions into the marketplace, our most basic rights are being taken from us, we can say the same for hospitals, Hydro-Québec, our forests, and the soil beneath our feet. We share so much more than public services: we share our living spaces, spaces that were here before we were born. We want them to survive us.

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Yet a handful of greedy persons, answering to no one, is hard at work devastating these spaces - and they are getting away with it, with projects such as Plan Nord, shale gas, and more. For these few, who view the future in terms of the next quarter's profit, nature has value only when measured in economic spin-offs. Blind to the beauty of the common good, this clique is avid and unpredictable, with eyes only for its faraway stockholders. It caters to those stockholders' whims in colonial style, with no consultation. The primary victims of this wholesale sell-off are Native women, far from the media, poor and easily ignored.

Fortunately, though Native peoples are displaced each and every time wealth is found under or on their land, they have kept up the fight. Some of these ruthless exploitation projects have been put on ice due to the women and men who have dared to defy them. These men and women have stood their ground against this plunder of resources, despite dire warnings that our economic survival depends on the speedy exploitation of our underground wealth, whatever the price.

Together, each and every one of us will be affected by the waste of our resources, because we are concerned, not only for those who will come after us, but also for the people with whom we now share these spaces - we want to think better thoughts: we want to think ahead.

This is the meaning of our vision, and the essence of our strike: it is a shared, collective action whose scope lies well beyond student interests. We are daring to call for a different world, one far removed from the blind submis-

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sion our present commodity-based system requires. Individuals, nature, our public services, these are being seen as commodities: the same tiny elite is busy selling everything that belongs to us. And yet we know that public services are not useless expenditures, nor are they consumer goods.

Together we have realized that our underground wealth cannot be measured in tons of metal, and that a woman's body is not a selling point. In the same way, education cannot be sold; it ought to be provided to each and every one of us, without regard to our immigration status or our condition. Our aim is for an educational system that is for us, that we will share together.

Because education is a training ground for humanity, and because humanity does not bow to economic competitiveness, we refuse to allow our schools to bend under the weight of well-stocked portfolios. Together, we call for an egalitarian school system that will break down hierarchies, one that will pose a threat to all those men and women who still think they can rule over us with a free hand.

In providing everyone with the resources they need to develop their full capacities, we will succeed in creating a society where decision-making and the ways in which we organize our lives with one another are shared. This is the heart of our vision. Education is not a branch of the economy, nor is it a short-term training service. Our educational system, which is at the root of all knowledge, can allow us to pave the way towards freeing society as a whole; it can provide a liberating education that will lay the foundation for self-determination.

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We believe that if our educational system is to be seen as a space where universal knowledge is shared, it must banish all forms of gender-based discrimination and domination. And yet a woman in the current educational system walks a path just as difficult as the one she walks in today's society. It is futile to believe that unequal status is no longer reproduced in the halls of academe: we are disgusted to see that the professions traditionally associated with women are still undervalued, and that it is still mostly women who study for these professions. We women are numerous in Bachelor's-level classrooms, but how many of us climb to the highest rungs of the academic ladder?

We are against prolonging this discrimination against women as well as against people who are in any way shunted aside by society. Our aim is to make our educational system well and truly a space where equality reigns and differences are respected. Our fervent wish is for an educational system that allows each and every one of us to blossom.

In choosing to strike, we have chosen to fight for these ideas. We have chosen to create a power relationship, the only mechanism that will allow us to tip the scales. Sharing this responsibility together, we can accomplish a great deal: but in order to do this we have to speak up, and speak up forcefully. History has shown us eloquently that if we do choose hope, solidarity and equality, we must not beg for them: we must take them. This is what we mean by *combative syndicalism*. Now, at a time when new democratic spaces are springing up all around us, we must make use of these to create a new world. Now is no time for mere declarations of intent: we must act. In calling for a social

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strike today, we will be marching alongside you, people of Québec, in the street tomorrow. In calling for a social strike today, we hope that tomorrow, we will be marching, together, alongside the whole of Québec society.

Together, we can rebuild.

Share our future.