

Let's Stop the Injunction, YO!

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For activists in the Outaouais region, the 2012 student struggle reached its climax during the week of April 16-20, after an injunction was issued that required classes to be held and forbade all demonstrations within 25 metres of any building at the University of Québec in Outaouais (UQO). This was the first university in Québec that faced a "general" injunction that attempted to force classes to resume in all departments. Therefore, this week proved to be an important test case to ascertain the balance of power in this new context of repression by the court system. This presented a serious challenge for activists in Outaouais, who were somewhat isolated both by their geographical location and by their relative lack of experience mobilizing in the past. Nonetheless, these activists were able to undertake actions on the local level that built up a certain momentum in confronting the storm of injunctions raining down on different CEGEPs and universities in Québec.

I will begin here by drawing a portrait of the four days of active resistance that took place from the 16th to 19th of April 2012. These four days led to a general suspension of classes, for an undefined period, as well as a new injunction imposing a so-called "Videotron" clause. I will return to this clause at the end of the essay. Since the strike committee was such an essential part of coordinating and radicalizing the movement, I will also briefly present the principles established within this committee and how it functioned.

Red week

Day One

On the morning of April 16, the injunction imposed on UQO took effect. This meant that courses should have been given beginning at eight-thirty a.m. At around seven-thirty, in response to a call made by the strike committee on social media titled "*Bloquons l'injonction YO!*" (Let's Stop the Injunction, YO!), a demonstration that had begun in a park near campus spontaneously entered UQO in order to "break" the injunction and ensure compliance with the strike. After a chaotic beginning due to the lack of planning, they made the decision to barricade themselves inside. Semi-organized affinity groups sharing tasks established the necessary logistical steps for the proper functioning of the occupation. All major decisions were taken by a general caucus. At this early moment, discussions and decisions that had taken place beforehand in strike committee meetings greatly helped the democratic organizing of the action and the demands that accompanied it.

The UQO administration promptly announced by intercom that classes in the two buildings affected by the strike were suspended for the day. The occupiers refused to evacuate the premises, demanding the suspension of classes for the entire week, and eventually forced the UQO administration to ask the judge to lift the injunction. This request was denied, and the injunction was reinforced—allegedly because UQO did not do all it could to ensure classes would be offered. When this news was announced at about four o'clock PM, the people inside finally decided

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to lift the barricades, after having negotiated with the police force that there would be no arrests—a commitment that was surprisingly respected.

Day Two

On April 17th, things were clear: UQO had become a bunker, heavily guarded by private security as well as the Gatineau Police force (SPVG). Some activists managed to get onto the property to observe the situation and the possibility for actions. Not long afterwards, a professor was arrested and anyone known for involvement in activism or wearing a red square was refused access to the building. Upset, people tried several times to force their way in but did not succeed.

At the end of the afternoon, a UQO administrator announced to the people present that they were now being considered "intruders" on UQO property and that therefore the SPVG had been given the authority to disperse them immediately. Faced with this affront, the activists spontaneously took to the streets to continue their protest. Despite the threat of arrest, the people there continued to walk on a busy main street until a major police operation was underway, with the riot police deployed in Outaouais for the first time in at least thirty years. At the conclusion of this first day when classes were held in spite of and against the strike vote, the SPVG announced in the media that from this moment on, any person demonstrating in the streets would be arrested.

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Day Three

On the 18th of April, it was clear that the tone of the SPVG had changed, especially now that the Sureté du Québec (SQ) was present to provide backup. A large police deployment was organized around the Taché building, where the majority of actions were organized. Seeing that it would be impossible to enter because of the number of police officers there, the demonstration took to the street and marched towards the Brault building, a few hundred metres away.

The demonstration was kettled by the SPVG riot squad when it turned down a smaller road, and from ten o'clock a.m. to four o'clock p.m., more than 220 people were detained in the street, in vans, or on buses, and searched and photographed. The SPVG charged them with obstructing a public road under section 500.1 of the Highway Safety Code; at the time of writing those charges were still pending.

Day Four

By Thursday, people from elsewhere in Québec came to increase the number of activists to more than 700 people. Five solidarity buses came in from Montreal and Valleyfield as reinforcements, and a demonstration was held in downtown Hull. Back on campus, it was clear that the police forces would do everything necessary to not let the demonstrators enter any UQO buildings, especially the Taché Building, which was still a bunker controlled by the SPVG.

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Despite this, a few dozen people managed to enter UQO twice but were pushed back out right away. A long demonstration down the roads leading to the Brault Building finally allowed protesters to move their actions to that building, which had the least active involvement and thus was also the least protected. Despite repeated and violent police repression, a door was eventually opened and a hundred or so people were able to enter the cafeteria, whose exits leading to the rest of the building were subsequently blocked by the SPVG riot squad, which was already inside. Meanwhile, the SQ lost no time closing the only other possible way out by pushing the support demonstration back outside. This occupation of the cafeteria, which ended with the arrest of 148 people, forced the closure of two buildings and suspended classes indefinitely.

"Red Thursday"—which finished at around four the following morning in the police station—marked the end of a week of confrontations between protestors and the police (the SPVG and the SQ). A total of at least 370 arrests were carried out that week, the majority of which took place on Wednesday and Thursday.

Despite all of this resistance, the following Monday a modified injunction ordered UQO to end its semester, while requiring all work and exams to be done electronically without students ever coming to class: the so-called "Vidéotron" clause.¹ In addition to building closures and the harsh release conditions imposed on people arrested on the Thursday, the primary consequence of this situation was to render the usual organizing space

¹ Vidéotron is a popular internet service provider in Québec.

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that UQO had provided inaccessible to other activists in the Outaouais.

Autonomous Organizing and the Principles of Struggle

During the week of April 16th to 20th, the work done beforehand in strike committee discussions proved necessary to the success of this campaign. Committee meetings took place every day in the morning and evening to make decisions about strategies, places to demonstrate and other actions. This was a space that activists considered to be central to organizing the strike and other actions related to it.

The UQO strike committee was initially created by activists from individual units on strike, following the failure of a general strike vote in the university's overall student association, AGE-UQO. Although at first the goal of the committee was simply to coordinate the actions to maintain compliance with the strike within specific academic programs, and to work toward a general strike affecting all of the students at UQO, once this objective was achieved important debates on strategy and tactics took place within the committee.

The strike committee combined the principles of direct democracy with strategies focused on direct action, and heated debates during its meetings archived a certain radicalization of activists. For example, the Outaouais activists began to hold "snake marches" with no official route during the strike, and later focused on blocking strategic locations at UQO and other public and private

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institutions. The committee always operated through general assemblies, without a coordination committee or any other type of "management." To do this, meetings were initially scheduled for every week, then every two days; when there were large mobilizations, meetings of a few dozen people would be held both in the morning and at night.

Over the course of many weeks, debates unfolded that led to the adoption of organizing principles on concepts like direct democracy, direct action, support for a diversity of tactics, and non-collaboration with the police. With great difficulty, and often in a state of chaos that made "logical" analysis extremely difficult, these activist experiences were able to bring political principles and tactics that seemed to have disappeared years ago, back to life.