



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Quebec students defeat tuition hikes and fight for free education, 2010-2012

Time period notes: *On September 24, 2012, the newly elected Quebecois government cancelled the proposed tuition hike.*

1 April

2010

to: 21 September

2012

Country: Canada

Location City/State/Province: Quebec

Location Description: *While the campaign mostly occurred in Quebec, there were solidarity actions all over the world during the summer of 2012.*

Goals:

The unifying goal and call to action was a demand to revoke the proposed 82% tuition increase in Quebec universities. Other strands of the movement also called for free, universal university education and an end to neoliberal austerity measures.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 062. Student strike › (in one day increments)

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 019. Wearing of symbols › red felt squares indicating that students are "Squarely in the Red"
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 062. Student strike

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications

- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 019. Wearing of symbols › red felt squares indicating that students are "Squarely in the Red"
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 062. Student strike

Methods in 4th segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 019. Wearing of symbols › red felt squares indicating that students are "Squarely in the Red"
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 062. Student strike

Methods in 5th segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 019. Wearing of symbols › red felt squares indicating that students are "Squarely in the Red"
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 062. Student strike

Methods in 6th segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 019. Wearing of symbols › red felt squares indicating that students are "Squarely in the Red"
- 022. Protest disrobings › naked marches exposed police brutality and sent the message "tuition hikes will take the clothes from our back"
- 038. Marches › including naked and nearly naked marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 062. Student strike
- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws

Notes on Methods:

The fundamental unit of organization for this campaign was decentralized general assemblies grouped into larger student unions.

Classifications

Classification:

Defense

Cluster:

Democracy

Economic Justice

Group characterization:

- parents
- professors and community members
- students
- union members

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois, Jérémie Bédard Wien, Martine Desjardins (FEUQ), CLASSE

Partners:

The Fédération étudiante universitaire du Québec (FEUQ), the Fédération étudiante collégiale du Québec (FECQ)

External allies:

The United Nations, Human Rights Watch and other groups openly criticized the Liberal government for enacting Bill 78

Involvement of social elites:

Not known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- CLASSE
- the Fédération étudiante collégiale du Québec (FECQ)
- the Fédération étudiante universitaire du Québec (FEUQ)

Groups in 2nd Segment:**Groups in 3rd Segment:****Groups in 4th Segment:****Groups in 5th Segment:****Groups in 6th Segment:**

- Human Rights Watch
- The United Nations

Segment Length: *Approximately 4 months*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Quebec Cabinet, headed by Liberal Premier Jean Charest

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

Campaigner violence:

Some protests devolved into riot conditions, but the unions had issued a statement of nonviolence.

Repressive Violence:

severe police brutality, including, but not limited to: rubber bullets, noise machines, tear gas, pepper spray, clubs. Many students were hospitalized and one student lost an eye.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

6 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

Student organizers successfully achieved their campaign, student unions continue to meet and the movement grew as the campaign escalated with unprecedented action on campuses that were previously silent in times of activism.

In February of 2010, Quebec Finance Minister Raymond Bachand called for what he deemed a "cultural revolution" to change the way the Quebecois populace used public services, including a tuition fee hike for post-secondary education.

The first major show of resistance to this occurred on 1 April, when 12,000 marched under the young Coalition Against Fees and Privatization in Public Services. This group, generally referred to as CLASSE, became an influential far-left student union with hundreds of thousands of active members. It grew out of a previous group, the Association for Student Syndicalism (ASSE). As CLASSE it broadened, including many more college student associations who affiliated with the new name and focus.

CLASSE represented nearly half of the student strikers. It is important to note that CLASSE was a temporary coalition for this campaign, while other student unions (FECQ and FEUQ) were older and more permanent.

Protests continued and escalated during the summer and fall. On 24 September, fifty students from CLASSE occupied the Minister of Education's office in Montreal. Students voiced their demands directly to Line Beauchamp, Minister of Education, who tacitly did not respond.

Following continuous delays and lack of response from government officials, CLASSE organizers called for a national day of action on 23 November, during which actions occurred across the province. Notable examples include a 1000-person blockade of Hydro-Quebec's headquarters and a 25,000-person temporary student strike for 1-3 days.

By 6 December, student groups had boycotted or walked out of a meeting with corporate leaders and the Ministry of Education. 60,000 striking students joined them in solidarity. Organizing continued throughout the winter, preparing students to walk out early the next year.

On 14 February 2011, students at Concordia called a day of strikes to protest the tuition hikes. Throughout March, students used tactics like banner drops, rallies, general assemblies and a 12,000-person demonstration to express their discontent with the tuition increase.

On 17 March, the Quebec government released their budget detailing the extent of the tuition increase, which ranged from 75%-82% depending on the university.

Five days later, 80 students occupied the Minister of Finance's office in Montreal. The following week, 60,000 students struck and 30 occupied CRÉPUQ (the Conference of Quebec University Principals)'s offices.

In later March and early April, students from the Fédération étudiante collégiale du Québec (FECQ) and the Fédération étudiante universitaire du Québec (FEUQ) protested the Young Liberals' Congress for three consecutive weekends. These two student unions were founded during previous strikes and had remained active, but with far less membership than CLASSE was able to generate.

By 10 November, more than 200,000 students were on strike and 30,000 held a march- the largest student protest in Quebec since the 2005 strike, yet the student unions had yet to declare an all-out student strike.

Over the course of this first year of the campaign, students formed general assemblies and used direct democracy to build student power and create opportunities to express grievances regarding the tuition hike. Student organizers explain that this kind of participation allowed smaller student groups to politicize and mobilize students toward a projected large-scale strike.

While the tuition hike was the impetus for the campaign, CLASSE was quick to explain that the tuition increase was a symptom of a set of governmental reforms that would ultimately infringe on broader social welfare. Programs involving education, health care, and market regulation were all under siege by the Liberal Quebecois government. Through these largely decentralized, University-based general assemblies, students organized and participated in dozens of actions, marches, demonstrations and occupations.

In addition, students created their own newspapers and released multiple manifestos throughout the campaign; they were featured in every school newspaper and municipal and most provincial news sources. Because of prior student strikes (in 1968, 1974, 1968, 1986, 1988, 1990, 1996 and 2005), there was a common set of practices that students knew to implement in order to publicize the campaign. This campaign, however, was different from the others, as student organizers attempted to galvanize support around the issue of student debt rather than merely the tuition increase.

Students escalate, experience repression, and broaden participation in their campaign

In the beginning of 2012 students escalated their protests.

On 17 February, police arrested thirty-seven students.

Protests increased in frequency. Three days later, 36,000 university students finally declared a mass strike.

The police then escalated. Through the end of February into early March, arrests increased along with the use of pepper spray, tear gas, and even a stun grenade that resulted in a student protester losing an eye.

Students responded with massive protests that stopped traffic nearly every day in March.

On 27 April, Quebec Premier Jean Charest offered to stretch the tuition increase over 7 years instead of five. Student spokespeople from 43 student associations quickly denounced this proposal, along with any attempt at compromise that would include a tuition increase.

CLASSE released a counter proposal, including, "a reduction in the amount of money spent on research and publicity by the province's universities, a salary freeze for the institutions' top administrators and the scrapping of major infrastructure projects like satellite campuses." Further, CLASSE called for a tax on banks of "0.14 per cent this year that would rise to 0.7 per cent by 2016. The tax would generate \$400 million" -- the sum needed to abolish all tuition fees.

On 4 May, students returned to the streets, this time, naked or wearing only underwear, and holding banners that suggested that tuition increases would require them to "sell the shirts off of their backs." They also wanted to display their bodies to prevent police brutality. After students rejected another governmental proposal, Line Beauchamp stepped down from her position as

Minister of Education.

Then, on 18 May, the Quebec national assembly passed emergency legislation (known as Bill 78 or Law 12), attempting to regulate demonstrations and impose fines for protesting. The government also interrupted classes until further notice to allow the government and the universities to put their energy into quelling the strike.

Two days later, campaigners in a now illegal large protest. The civil disobedience met with reported police brutality.

22 May was the 100th day of the student strike and citizens participated in large marches in Montreal. In the next few days, hundreds of students and civilians were arrested – some reports offer a figure as high as 700 detainees. The United Nations expressed concern about these measures, which student organizers had dubbed as “draconian” on Twitter.

Following the passage of Bill 78, protests spread to more than 70 cities all over Canada and beyond. Using the tactic of the “Casserole March,” citizens took to the streets, raising a collective din with pots and pans reinforced by residents in apartments. Thousands of civilians and students began marching together each evening for more than a month, refusing to observe Bill 78. This also spurred lots of media attention and international solidarity efforts.

On 29 May, hundreds of lawyers, in full court attire, marched in opposition to Bill 78, although they refused to take a stand on the tuition question. At this point, the symbol of the red felt square had spread-- not just among students, but rather any and all people who were “Squarely in the Red” -- or, in debt.

By the end of the summer, many individual general assemblies chose to end the strike and return to school, although CLASSE maintained pressure in opposition to both the tuition increase and the lack of free, universal post-secondary education.

On 3 September, the Quebec electorate chose Pauline Marois to be the new Premier, from the separatist Parti Québécois. Also during this election, the far left Quebec Solidaire gained a second seat in Parliament. Among Marois’ first ministerial decrees included a promise to “cancel the tuition hike, repeal Law 12 (also known as Bill 78) and hold a summit to renegotiate education financing.” By 21 September, the last of the general assemblies decided to return to class, while CLASSE continued to pressure the government for their goal of free university education for all Quebec citizens.

Research Notes

Influences:

Previous student strikes in Quebec, 2011 student strike in Chile, Occupy movement, anti-austerity protests in Greece, Spain, Portugal, England and the Arab Spring (1)

Sources:

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