

REVOLTAS POPULARES CONTEMPORÂNEAS  
NUMA PERSPECTIVA COMPARADA

**Practices and principles of  
combative syndicalism in the 2012  
Quebec student strike\***

*Práticas e princípios de sindicalismo combativo  
na greve estudantil de 2012 no Quebec*

*Prácticas y principios del sindicalismo combativo  
en la huelga estudiantil de 2012 en Quebec*

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**Abstract:** Similarly to other protest movements in the 21st century, the Quebec students articulated their demand for tuition-free education alongside a critique of neoliberal policies, the failed logic of austerity, and the weakening of democratic institutions. While the central participants in the struggle were students, this broader social critique attracted a diverse array of citizens, activists and organizations to its cause, resulting in a broad-based movement that for a time became the center of political struggles in Quebec.

**Keywords:** Canada; student movement; street protests; strike.

**Resumo:** À semelhança de outros movimentos de protesto no século 21, os estudantes do Quebec articularam a sua demanda para a educação livre com uma crítica das políticas neoliberais, a lógica falha da austeridade e o enfraquecimento das instituições democráticas. Enquanto os participantes principais da luta eram estudantes, esta crítica social atraiu um número mais abrangente e diversificado de cidadãos, ativistas e organizações, resultando em um movimento de ampla base que, por um tempo, se tornou o centro das lutas políticas no Quebec.

**Palavras-chave:** Canadá; movimento estudantil; protestos de rua; greve.

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**Resumen:** Al igual que otros movimientos de protesta en el siglo 21, los estudiantes de Quebec articularan sus demandas de educación gratuita con una crítica de las políticas neoliberales, la lógica fallida de austeridad y el debilitamiento de las instituciones democráticas. Mientras que los principales participantes en la lucha eran estudiantes, esta crítica social atrajo un mayor número y diversidad de ciudadanos, activistas y organizaciones, lo que resulta en un movimiento de base amplia que, durante un determinado período, se convirtió en el centro de las luchas políticas en Quebec.

**Palabras clave:** Canada; movimiento estudiantil; protestos de calle; greve.

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On February 13, 2012, after two years of protests, petitions, occupations, and one-day strikes, students across Quebec voted to go on an unlimited general strike against the provincial Liberal government's plan to increase tuition fees by 75 per cent over five years. The strike declaration sparked a social movement that while focused on the issue of tuition fees was also understood to be *part of a global resurgence of leftist resistance* that could be seen in movements like the Indignados in Spain, the movement of the Squares in Greece, and Occupy Wall Street in the United States. Similarly to these movements, the Quebec students articulated their demand for tuition-free education alongside a critique of neoliberal policies, the failed logic of austerity, and the weakening of democratic institutions. While the central participants in the struggle were students, this broader social critique attracted a diverse array of citizens, activists and organizations to its cause, resulting in a broad-based movement that for a time became the center of political struggles in Quebec.

Like other recent movements, the student strike was an example of direct democratic organization. Within activist circles, much has been made of the spontaneous nature of these democratic uprisings. In contrast, although the student strike was the context for a spontaneous citizen uprising in the form of the '*manif des casseroles*,' it was itself highly organized and carried out according to a particular understanding of democratic practice influenced by syndicalist ideology. While discussions in general assemblies were fundamental to the strength of the movement, direct democracy cannot be reduced to the space of these meetings. The 'combative syndicalism' of the student associations, with its emphasis on collective direct action, lent deliberative democracy a confrontational energy and an ability to generate a meaningful counter-power in the face of the neoliberal state. My aim in this essay is threefold: to provide a description of the democratic practices behind

the strike; to explore the ideological basis of the core principles and organizational structures of student syndicalism in Quebec; and lastly, to situate student syndicalism in relation to other recent tendencies on the left. In the process, I touch on key activist debates on the degree to which organizational structures should be decentralized, whether or not specific demands should be directed at those in power, the value of refusing or engaging in negotiations, the importance of adopting an offensive rather than defensive position, and the meaning of democratic practice.

In his reflections on recent popular uprisings, French philosopher Alain Badiou argues that in order to move beyond spectacular but short-lived revolts, emerging political movements must become more organized and yet avoid reverting to the Party model that was dominant in the emancipatory politics of the twentieth century (BADIOU, 2012, p. 65-66). If a form of organization that lives up to both ‘the event and idea alike’ does not emerge, Badiou concludes ‘the rebirth of History is nothing more than a brilliant anecdote, and politics remains apathetic’ (BADIOU, 2012, p. 69-70). At a time when many of the more spontaneous uprisings of the past few years have diminished in intensity or scattered into smaller movements, student syndicalism offers one potential model of organization that combines the popular democracy and local autonomy of horizontalist ideology with the capacity to coordinate and sustain a mass mobilization over a long duration. The strike not only endured for 206 days, making it the longest student strike in Quebec history, it also resulted in a concrete victory wherein the proposed tuition increase was cancelled, and doubled the size of the most combative national student association. The distinctive traits of student syndicalism indicate a way forward for leftist movements in the twenty-first century. Whether or not such a model could be applied outside of the student milieu depends on the degree to which already existing institutional spaces can be democratized and radicalized.

### **CLASSE: The Organization Behind the Strike**

Along with the cessation of studies during the course of the strike, students picketed classrooms, took to the streets daily, and engaged in various forms of civil disobedience and direct action. In this way the students effectively shut down teaching activities at the French universities and CEGEPs, pressured the government to the negotiating table, forced the issue of post-secondary funding to the center of public

discussion, and influenced the calling of an election.<sup>1</sup> The 22nd day of each month became a massive day of action that attracted hundreds of thousands of demonstrators. Nightly marches of thousands to tens of thousands occurred from late April until September. In May, citizens nightly took over the streets of their own neighborhoods to bang pots and pans in opposition to an anti-protest law that the Liberal government passed in an attempt to squash the daily student protests. In June, the students targeted the Montreal Grand Prix events in an attempt to undermine the city's tourist economy and to launch a feminist critique of the commodification of women's bodies. These various protest actions were complemented by intensive symbolic production on the part of protesters that included social movement and student media, memes and information circulated on social media, lip-synched music videos, nude protests, masquerades, marching bands, costumes, graffiti, posters and stickers, protest mascots, elaborate banners, placards and puppets, and the color red on every imaginable surface.

The street demonstrations, negotiations, and corresponding debates in the media about the proposed tuition increase were the most visible dimension of the struggle. What was less visible was the intensive organization and impressive democratic decision making behind all of the students' actions. The large numbers, duration and creativity of the street mobilizations depended on a particular organizational infrastructure that demanded hours spent in a general assembly (GA) multiple times per week. There are three primary student federations in Quebec who are organized to represent the interests of CEGEP and university students at the provincial level. These include the *Fédération étudiante universitaire du Québec* (FEUQ), the *Fédération étudiante collégiale du Québec* (FECQ), and the *Association pour une solidarité syndicale étudiante* (ASSÉ). For the duration of the most recent strike, ASSÉ formed a temporary coalition, *La Coalition large de l'Association pour une solidarité syndicale étudiante* (CLASSE). What distinguishes ASSÉ or CLASSE from its more conventional counterparts is its commitment to the principle of free post-secondary education, combative syndicalism, and direct democracy. The FEUQ and FECQ are regularly criticized by members of ASSÉ for their corporatist approach to organization, their close relationships with the dominant political parties, and their reliance on lobbying as a primary tactic. In this essay I will only reflect on CLASSE as it was the national student coalition

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed chronology of the strike see SOROCHAN, (2012).

that led the movement towards the unlimited general strike and because it represented the majority of the striking student associations. The acronym ASSÉ, incidentally, resembles the French word *assez*, meaning enough, or *ya basta!*

On the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> of December, 2011, the CLASSE was founded during an ASSÉ congress at CEGEP Valleyfield (ASSÉ, 2011, p. 63-67). CLASSE extended the decision-making space of ASSÉ to include student associations that were not affiliated with ASSÉ but that were committed to fighting against the proposed tuition hike through direct action tactics. CLASSE acted as the primary decision-making body of the strike and a mechanism for coordinating collective action at a national level. As of late August, 2012, CLASSE included 67 student associations comprising 102,284 students.<sup>2</sup> According to its founding documents, the core principles of the coalition were, first, for a quality education that is free, accessible, public, non-discriminatory, and free from private interference, and second, for student syndicalism that is democratic, combative, feminist and independent (ASSÉ, 2013, p. 32-36). The conditions of affiliation were less demanding than those for ASSÉ and consisted of a position against any increases in tuition fees, an affirmation of the GA as the highest decision-making body of the association, and that the association adopt a mandate for an unlimited general strike or at least consult their members on the subject. The affiliation process was enacted through a simple vote on the part of the association and confirmed by a vote on the part of the CLASSE congress. Aside from the conditions of affiliation and more limited principles, aims, and the expected duration of CLASSE, the organizational structure and internal procedures of ASSÉ and CLASSE were identical.

One of the key aspects of CLASSE's organizational structure is the principle according to which major strategic decisions are made through direct democratic procedures. The congress was the name given to the national GA where delegates from each association convened to make decisions for the coalition as a whole. These delegates were expected to act at the congress in accordance with the specific mandates given to them from their local association's GA rather than exercise the power of traditional representatives. Deliberation was encouraged, resulting in time-intensive meetings. A typical ASSÉ congress lasts for two days from 9am until 9pm each day, although during the strike

<sup>2</sup> See, *Bloquons la hausse*: <<http://www.bloquonslahausse.com/laclasse/membres/>>.

period the congresses were limited to a single day. The bottom-up structure privileged the initiative and actions of the local associations. It also compelled members to aim towards consensus to ensure that mandates were widely endorsed and could mobilize active support. However, voting rather than a strict consensus was the procedure used during congresses. While the congress provided a space for the student movement to strategize at a national level, individual associations maintained their autonomy and were not constrained by the decisions of the congress so long as they continued to live up to the conditions of affiliation.<sup>3</sup> For example, if a local association was to hold a strike vote that does not pass they could continue to be a part of CLASSE even if the congress had endorsed a general unlimited strike on the part of its members. In this way CLASSE attempted to coordinate collective action according to shared principles while allowing the associations to maintain their own initiative within certain limits. If an association were perceived to act contrary to the basic principles of CLASSE the congress could expulse it through a vote. CLASSE also elected students to an executive council and working groups who were expected to carry out the mandates set by the congress and the day-to-day tasks of coordination, mobilization, and communication. These executants could be immediately recalled by the congress if they acted in contradiction to its decisions. Instead of representatives, CLASSE had spokespeople who relayed the decisions of its membership to the government and the public.

Another of the key characteristics of CLASSE's decision-making structure is the frequency and regularity of the GAs. Congresses were held weekly throughout the duration of the strike and each association was expected to hold their own weekly GA in order to determine how delegates were to vote at the congresses. CLASSE had a number of committees working full time to support the strike and to meet the mandates of congress. These included the Committee to Maintain and Enlarge the Strike, the Media Committee, the Negotiation Committee, the Legal Committee, and the Women's Committee. Clearly, to simply organize the logistics of these meetings and to participate in them required a considerable amount of time, labour, and commitment. Nevertheless, this organizational structure proved to be highly functional, effectively managing the day-to-day logistics of the strike as well as engaging students in direct action and inspiring strong feelings of solidarity. Although not an easy process, and not free from internal

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<sup>3</sup> ASSÉ-solidarite: <<http://www.asse-solidarite.qc.ca/presentation-2/>>.

conflicts, this model successfully organized a six month-long strike and exposed participants to an intensive experience of direct democracy and syndicalist-inspired collective action. In order for this method of decision-making to function, the students needed the time afforded them by the strike, financial resources, highly developed organizational capacities, and political intelligence. Such a commitment of time and energy also required strong ideological convictions in the methods, principles and aims of this struggle. These principles were drawn primarily from syndicalist ideology and history.

### **Syndicalist Ideology and the Global Justice Movement**

ASSÉ was founded on February 25, 2001, in Sherbrooke, Quebec.<sup>4</sup> It represents the reformation of the syndicalist tendency of the student movement that has been active in Quebec in various organizational manifestations since the 1960s. ASSÉ also bears the influence of the global justice movement as its formation coincided with mobilization of students and others against the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) summit meeting in Quebec City in 2001. Student syndicalism in Quebec therefore draws on both the particular militant history of student unionism in the province and more recent activist movements critical of globalized capitalism. On an organizational level tension exists between syndicalism and the affinity-based models favoured by global justice activism. So far, however, ASSÉ has managed to strike a balance between them. The strength of this movement lies somewhere between the mass appeal and democratic practices of student unionism, and the dynamism and radicalism of anti-capitalist affinity groups.

The preamble to ASSÉ's core principles cites the first article of France's 1946 'Charte de Grenoble' as forming the basis of student syndicalist organization (ASSÉ, 2013, p. 5). The first article of the Charter defines students as young intellectual workers and goes on to describe a series of rights and responsibilities that pertain to students. The Charter characterizes the rights of students as a right to work and live under the best possible conditions of material, social, and personal independence, guaranteed by the free exercise of their rights of association (MARSAN 2005, p. 50). It also stipulates the responsibilities of students to society as being the defense of truth through the propagation of culture and history, and the defense of liberty against all forms of oppression. The

<sup>4</sup> See, ASSÉ-solidarite: <<http://www.asse-solidarite.qc.ca/asse/historique/>>.

Grenoble Charter led to the creation of the *Union National des Étudiants Français* (UNEF), a student union that represented a politicization of student organizations in France and that was central in the events of May 68. In a pamphlet published by ASSÉ about the history of the student movement in Quebec, Benoit Marsan notes that the phrase “student syndicalism” first appears in the writings of the student associations in the 1960s. In 1964, inspired by UNEF as well as the militant workers’ movement in Quebec, students formed their first syndicalist student union, the *Union General des Étudiants du Québec* (UGEQ). Marsan argues that prior to this period students were not considered to have a distinct political role in society and student associations existed for the sole purpose of organizing extra-curricular leisure and sporting activities and for providing student services. This is still the case for the majority of Anglophone student associations in North America.

The significance of the Grenoble Charter was that it laid the ground for a politicization of student organizations. In defining students as young intellectual workers it associated them with the workers’ movement, which led the student associations to model themselves on union structures and modes of action. In fact, the concept of ‘combative syndicalism’ that ASSÉ regularly refers to in its documents is taken from the Quebec workers’ movement of the 1970s and the phrase appears to be unique to this context. In his writings from the early 1970s, Jean-Marc Pottie defines combative syndicalism as a brand of worker organization that is confrontational, involves an understanding of worker struggles as class struggle, and is led by the base of workers themselves (PIOTTE, 1998, p. 21-8). The adjective ‘combative’ is used by Pottie to differentiate this brand of unionism from more bureaucratic and business friendly unions that he describes as ‘syndicalisme de boutique’ or ‘syndicalisme d’affaire.’ The attributes that Pottie ascribes to combative syndicalism are essentially those of revolutionary unionism.<sup>5</sup>

Ralph Darlington (2008) provides a helpful synthesis of the central ideological and organizational principles of syndicalist thought and practice based on its peak period of influence in the early 1900s to 1920s. As part of the revolutionary tradition, syndicalism understood capitalist society to be composed of two classes that were diametrically opposed: the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. Its ultimate aim was the abolition of the wage system and the replacement of the existing capitalist

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<sup>5</sup> Since in all unions are referred to as ‘les syndicats’ in French the term syndicalism does not automatically carry the same revolutionary connotations, hence the need for the qualifier.



social, political and economic system with a society based on common ownership and control over the means of production (DARLINGTON, 2008, p. 21-2). Syndicalism, however, differs from other revolutionary approaches that would seek to achieve these goals by attempting to seize control of the state apparatus, either by engaging in political struggle within parliament or through armed insurrection. Darlington describes how syndicalism arose out of disillusionment with both parliamentary democracy and reformist trade unions as paths towards social transformation. Rather than socialism introduced from above, syndicalism aimed to initiate revolutionary change from below, through workers' self-activity and self-organization at the point of production. Syndicalism is thus an active, voluntarist conception of revolutionary strategy that emphasizes the subjective character of self-emancipation. This radical dimension of syndicalism was partly a reaction to the deterministic conception of Marxism that was dominant at the time amongst the socialist parties and which led them to adopt a reformist and bureaucratic practice as they awaited what they believed to be the inevitable collapse of capitalism due to its own internal contradictions.

The core principles of syndicalism could be distilled as follows: class solidarity and organization based on shared interests (rather than explicit political ideology); direct action and a rejection of parliamentarism, representatives or other intermediaries; and worker self-management that privileges local autonomy and initiative. The student movement in Quebec reflects these principles through their organizational structures, chosen tactics, and rejection of parliamentary modes of action. The idea of the general strike in particular is one of the defining concepts of syndicalist ideology. The general strike is a strike that spreads across industries to the point that all work is suspended and the normal functioning of society is paralyzed (DARLINGTON, 2008, p. 40). It is by means of the general strike that syndicalists believed a final revolutionary transfer of power would occur as the workers would have control over the instruments of production.<sup>6</sup> In the longer term, ASSÉ includes amongst its aims the democratization of educational institutions through self-management. In the short run, the aims of the student movement are not quite as radical, however, and the method of

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<sup>6</sup> The capacity of the capitalist state to violently repress such a transfer of power is a central area of contention in syndicalist theory. According to Darlington, the unrealistic nature of this scenario is partly what led to the decline of syndicalism in the interwar period as militants became convinced of the need for a Communist Party to defend the revolution and witnessed the success of Leninism in Russia.

the general strike has proven to be the most effective tactic for winning substantial concessions from the government. Eight general strikes have occurred in Quebec between 1968 and 2005 and six of these ended in success for student demands.<sup>7</sup> While students are not capable of shutting down capitalist production in the direct fashion of workers, the removal of their intellectual labour nevertheless can significantly disrupt institutional functioning. This removal of participation from the educational system combined with active economic disruption through street demonstrations formed the basis of student power during the 2012 strike and made the movement a real force to contend with.

Like syndicalist unions, the student associations of ASSÉ organize their members on the basis of their fundamental shared interests rather than explicit political ideology. In making their reason for existence the defense of the material and moral interests of students, syndicalist student unions achieve a broad appeal, bringing members together on the basis of common interests in relation to educational policy, tuition fees, loans and bursary programs, student housing, curriculum, tax policies and so on. In this way ASSÉ avoids the narrow sectarianism of groups organized on a directly ideological basis. And yet, with this basic commonality as a starting point, these unions aim to function as spaces where members are politicized through experiences of collective action and democratic decision-making. While ASSÉ's primary aim, as stated in its Statutes and Regulations, is to defend the interests of their members regardless of political, philosophical, or religious belief, and while it maintains a neutral stance in relation to official political parties and elections, it is nevertheless a highly politicized organization (ASSÉ, 2013, p. 4). ASSÉ includes among its core principles and aims a number of strong political stances, and moreover, many individuals active within the organization identify with various leftist or anti-capitalist ideologies.<sup>8</sup> This is partly due to the influence of the radical

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<sup>7</sup> Bloquons la hausse: <http://www.bloquonslahausse.com/verslagreve/historique-des-greves-generales/> A more detailed description and analysis of the first six general strikes can be found here: BENOIT, (2005, p. 17-47).

<sup>8</sup> During ASSÉ's Orientation Congress in May 2013 members considered a proposition that would have ASSÉ adopt a clear anti-capitalist stance among its core principles. The motion was ultimately rejected due to concerns that it would alienate too many student associations who were less radicalized. For the time being, it was decided that the already existing principle 'against any form of globalization that places the primacy of profits over the well-being of the population' [my translation] would suffice as a critical stance against capitalism. The fact that this question has been raised in ASSÉ numerous times does speak to a strong anti-capitalist tendency within the organization. On the other hand, while ASSÉ does not endorse any political party, amongst the members there is active support for the social democratic party Québec Solidaire, which has made tuition-free post-secondary education a part of their platform.

politics that fuels syndicalist ideology and that was inherited from the workers' movement. A more recent influence, however, is the global justice movement of the 1990s and early 2000s.

The impact of the global justice movement on ASSÉ can be seen most directly in relation to the FTAA protests in Quebec City in 2001. The build-up to this summit protest coincided with the formulation and adoption of ASSÉ's statutes and regulations, which include in its core principles a position against any form of globalization that places the primacy of profits over the well-being of the population. (ASSÉ, 2013, p. 5; MOYAN-LAPOINTE, 2005, p. 102-107). In the aftermath of the protest, the newly created ASSÉ decided to engage in a campaign against the adjustment of education to the laws of the market. The action plan adopted at the first annual congress of ASSÉ in 2001 pushed for a continent-wide general strike against the FTAA. A number of meetings followed that brought together students opposed to the FTAA. At one notable meeting a split was evident between those who were critical of neoliberal globalization and those who simply wanted educational institutions to be exempt from the FTAA. The orientation of ASSÉ is marked by this struggle against capitalist globalization.

One predominant trait of the global justice movement and the summit protests during this period was the organization of temporary coalitions and networks of small affinity groups. The previous syndicalist organization in Quebec, l'ANEEQ, had dissolved in the early nineties due to internal conflicts. Throughout the nineties there was some division in the student left between organizations attempting to resuscitate a strong syndicalist organization, such as the *Mouvement pour le Droit à l'Éducation* (MDE), and those in favour of affinity groups and occasional coordinated action through forums like the *Forum de la Gauche Étudiante* in 1997 and the *Forum des Associations Étudiantes* (FAE) in 2000. Héloïse Moyan-Lapointe describes the FAE as a group that met irregularly and lacked internal structure (MOYAN-LAPOINTE, 2005, p. 102). In contrast, ASSÉ was intended to be an organization capable of maintaining a constant relation of force to the state. Marsan describes affinity groups as comprising between 5 and 20 people who assemble around to a precise issue or tactic and who collaborate with other similar groups while remaining totally autonomous (MARSAN, 2005, p. 65). Some of those in favour of affinity groups are critical of syndicalism and argue that it has a tendency to become bureaucratic and reformist in nature. Marsan

counters that while affinity groups are often more advanced on an ideological level and can help to radicalize students during times of intense mobilization, they are not capable of maintaining the movement during quiet periods. They are also not able to coordinate and maintain actions of long duration such as a strike that depend on extensive participation on the part of the mass of students. He points out that a mass movement requires decision-making spaces that engage the student population as a whole by addressing their general interests, and this is what syndicalism makes possible. The more permanent structure of an organization like ASSÉ enables greater resources to be amassed for supporting the goals of the movement and allows for the preservation of militant knowledge and training. Lastly, he notes how syndicalist unions respond to the daily struggles of the members all year long rather than simply fight against capitalism at punctual moments. Nevertheless, Marsan acknowledges the value of affinity groups for inspiring dynamism and radicalism and argues that an organization like ASSÉ must be capable of integrating militants without standing in the way of their initiative. The role of CLAC during the 2012 strike, which I will describe in more detail below, is a good example of the mutually beneficial relationship that can exist between these methods of organization.

### **Democracy Beyond Deliberation: Cohesion, Combativeness and Solidarity**

The democratic decision-making structure of CLASSE was an important dimension of the student strike and can be credited with inspiring commitment and solidarity among the participants. However, this success was the result of an interpretation of democracy as combative and collectivist, rather than a practice based primarily on dialogical exchange and the pluralistic expression of opinion. The ability to engage in a democratic practice that effectively arrived at decisions and actions that masses of students felt willing to stand behind was in part enabled by limits on participation. Unlike the more spontaneous popular assemblies that were open to everyone, as in OWS, Greece and Spain, in the student strike there were clear boundaries limiting who could take part in decision-making in CLASSE congresses and local GAs. Membership was based on those students who had a direct stake in the strike and tuition increase and who agreed at the outset to the core principles of CLASSE. We could

conclude that part of CLASSE's strength came from a relatively higher degree of ideological consistency when compared to other GA-based movements. A deliberative democracy that is completely open from the outset would have much more difficulty in finding common ground among the extremely divergent political positions and experiences of participants. This inclusiveness, along with the novelty of genuinely democratic spaces, lead many GA-based movements to value the diverse expression of opinion and ongoing deliberation as an end in itself. However, ultimately, deliberation is made worthwhile if it leads to corresponding decisions and actions that can credibly result in concrete gains. Otherwise, such meetings risk turning into spaces for personal expression and lose the collective energy and purpose that could sustain them. While the GAs were undoubtedly a cornerstone of the student strike, they were not seen as ends in themselves. The deliberative nature of these spaces existed within the confines of existing principles, aims and specific demands.

- *Combativeness* was an important qualifier of democratic practice during the strike and prevented democracy from being reduced to meetings. Student democracy consisted of a dialectic between deliberative meeting spaces and collective direct action that channeled people's energies in purposeful directions, built feelings of solidarity and commitment, and demonstrated the power of concerted efforts. This latter dimension of democratic practice is particularly important because not everyone who took part in this struggle participated in GAs. The legitimacy of the strike was defended not only through rational discussion and votes but also by those who put their bodies in front of classroom entrances and in the streets to prevent the collective will from being ignored. At the national level tactics were chosen according to a logic of steady escalation in the face of resistance on the part of the government. The lack of response to less confrontational methods, such as petitions and one-day demonstrations, helped to reinforce the legitimacy of the more coercive methods of the general strike, picket lines, economic disruption, and civil disobedience. Once the possibility of persuading the government of the rightness of the students' arguments was shown to be ineffective the lines of the struggle became visible. Democracy in the student movement was understood not as a consensual practice but as a form of popular power that existed within a field of opposing forces.

- A *collectivist* rather than individualistic interpretation of democratic practice was particularly important in the context of this struggle because the proponents of the tuition increase built their arguments around an understanding of education as an individual investment. Students had to insist that their actions be considered a strike in the face of media coverage that characterized it as a boycott, thereby reinforcing the idea that students are simply consumers of an educational product rather than intellectual workers whose knowledge contributes to the public good. Furthermore, some students opposed to the strike took the concept of the ‘right to education’ to mean an individual right that supersedes the collective decisions of the student associations. On this basis, a number of institutions and students filed court injunctions that forced professors to teach classes no matter how few students were in attendance and that banned strikers from picketing or assembling on campus.<sup>9</sup> One notable instance of collective consciousness was displayed in the documentary *Carré Rouge sur Fond Noir*. The scene takes place during a confrontation between picketing college students and an individual student attempting to cross the line. After this student complained that his ‘right to education’ was being disrupted the picketing students erupted into a spontaneous chant of ‘*Moi, Moi, Moi!*’ in mockery of this student’s individualistic attitude (BERTOLINO, and SAMSON, 2013). As ASSÉ’s chosen name suggests, solidarity is a core ideological principle that guides the actions of its members in a context where the only recognized social relation is a market relation.

### **The Destabilizing Potential of a Non-Negotiable Demand**

The general unlimited strike was organized around a specific, concrete, realizable demand. Some militants may feel that a specific demand automatically leads to reformism or a narrow base of support. Richard Day argues that movements oriented towards making demands of those in power reinforce the authority and legitimacy of

<sup>9</sup> “Crisis UQO as riot police enforce injunction; 161 arrested,” *Mediacoop.ca*, 18 April 2012. <<http://ssmu.mcgill.ca/tuitiontruth/news/crisis-at-uqo-riot-police-enforce-injunction-160-arrests/>>.

“UQAM gets injunction against striking Montreal students,” *Montreal Gazette*, 4 April 2012. <http://www.montrealgazette.com/news/montreal/6409104/story.html>.

“Judge grants injunction against striking students at Laval U,” *Toronto Sun*, 3 April 2012. <<http://www.torontosun.com/2012/04/03/judge-grants-injunction-against-striking-students-at-laval-u>>.

existing institutions (DAY, 2004, p. 716-748). This ignores, however, the extremely destabilizing effect that a demand can have if it is fundamentally incompatible with dominant assumptions. While a massive confrontational movement that lacks any specific demands can be very threatening to existing power relations, if this same movement lacks a unifying idea and an organizational base that is capable of replacing existing arrangements, there is little hope that it will be capable of effecting meaningful change. In the case of the student strike the demand became a unifying element for a diverse and wide-ranging critique of not only the privatization of education but also of neoliberal governance more generally. The demand was merely a focal point that channeled resistance in a way that made actual change conceivable and possible. The minimal and non-negotiable version of this demand was a rejection of the proposed tuition increase and a freeze at the 2012 level. However, unlike other recent movements that have adopted a defensive or reactionary stance against attacks on existing rights or welfare state programs, CLASSE took the offensive by conceiving of the tuition freeze as a first step within the larger aim of tuition free post-secondary education.<sup>10</sup> While this stance appeared almost utopian from within the hegemonic worldview supported by the mainstream media, CLASSE pushed the issue of free tuition onto the public agenda, which reflected its combative stance and marked this struggle as one with a truly progressive vision.

Badiou has argued that the limit of recent democratic uprisings such as the Egyptian Revolution in 2011 and the Maidan uprising in Ukraine in 2014 is that they brought people together around a purely negative demand that rejected existing power arrangements without unifying around a common vision of an alternative way of doing politics (BADIOU, 2014, unpaginated). The result was a return to an old division amongst the protesters between traditionalism and capitalist Modernity that left no room for the invention of new political organizations. In contrast, the decision of the student movement to construct a demand that was based on a positive conception of social change is one of the elements that made genuine transformation possible even if it was not yet realized in the 2012 strike. CLASSE pushed for the realization of their ultimate demand by proposing that the government introduce a small 0.7 per cent tax on banks that would cover the costs of tuition for

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<sup>10</sup> ASSÉ is explicitly critical of adopting a merely defensive stance, believing that only offensive struggles have the ability to win and preserve real gains. See Bonin (2014, p. 10).

all of Quebec.<sup>11</sup> The students defended their position by arguing that higher tuition diminishes accessibility to education and results in larger amounts of student debt. Rather than treat education as an individual consumer investment, the students insist that education is a social good that should be paid for through a progressive tax system.<sup>12</sup> The students avoided trying to win favour through publicity or tailoring their demands to fit dominant opinion. On the contrary, they attempted to inject their own vision of education into mainstream discourse.

The combative syndicalism of ASSÉ leads it to be very skeptical of negotiations as an effective way to win concessions from the government.<sup>13</sup> The state is not regarded as a neutral entity but one that is influenced by political parties, bosses, pressure groups and corporations. It is therefore a relation of force and not persuasion that compels the government to take student demands seriously. With this in mind ASSÉ evades negotiations as far as possible, until they feel they have asserted an adequate degree of pressure through collective action. They also aim to set the agenda of negotiations. For instance, in the 2012 strike the minimal demand was presented as non-negotiable. CLASSE agreed to enter into negotiations but with the mandate to push for a plan to move towards free tuition and to not negotiate the terms of the proposed tuition increase, which it utterly rejected. Meanwhile, the government likewise approached its tuition increase as non-negotiable, initially refusing to even meet with student representatives. When they did agree to meet they claimed that it was only to discuss the loans and bursaries program.

Darin Barney (2012) provides an insightful interpretation of the non-negotiable stance of the students as a necessary characteristic of a politics based on radical equality. Drawing on the work of Jacques Rancière, Barney argues that the student strike should be understood as an exceptionally political moment because it was ‘unintelligible’ and

<sup>11</sup> ‘La proposition de la CLASSE: taxer les banques pour financer la gratuitéscolaire,’ *Radio Canada*, 3 May 2012. <http://www.radio-canada.ca/nouvelles/societe/2012/05/03/002-classe-gratuite-taxe.shtml>

A summary of the CLASSE’s proposal can be read on the website: <http://www.bloquonslahausse.com/2012/05/contre-offre-de-la-classe-pour-une-universite-qui-fait-honneur-a-sa-mission-fondamentale/>

<sup>12</sup> A compilation of the arguments with which CLASSE defended their position is available here: <http://www.bloquonslahausse.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/argumentaire.pdf> For a good English summary of the students’ arguments see: Marshall, Andrew Gavin, (2012, unpaginated).

<sup>13</sup> A brief summary of these arguments on negotiations and combative syndicalism is presented in a flier produced by AÉCS (*Association Etudiante du Cégep de Sherbrooke*) and circulated during the 2012 strike. See *Syndicalism de Combat*: <http://latotale.info/sites/latotale.info/files/documents/aecs/tract-le-syndicalisme-de-combat/syndicalismedecombat.pdf>.



inherently ‘unreasonable’ within the logic of the neoliberal discourse that formed the basis of the government’s position. Only by treating their political convictions as matters of opinion, rather than truth, and their demands as if they were a matter of informed self-interest, rather than social ideals, could the students even begin to be considered reasonable partners by the government. Barney concludes that *the students’ uncompromising position formed the radical truth of the events*. If negotiations between the students and the government were bound to fail due to the deep incompatibility between the arbiters of dominant opinion and the uncompromising commitment to a politics of equality, why would one take part in the process at all? I would argue that even though legitimacy within the public sphere is secondary to the coercive power of direct action, by showing itself capable of addressing power and presenting concrete realizable plans to support their demand for free tuition, CLASSE made it very difficult for the government to ignore their claim.

By way of contrast, we could consider the politics of the *Convergence des luttes anti-capitalistes* (CLAC). CLAC has a very strong presence in grassroots anti-capitalist organizing in Montreal and they tend to favour tactics based on civil disobedience and direct action that include damaging corporate property, defending protesters against police attacks, forming Black Blocs and at times courting conflict with the police. The idea of negotiation is antithetical to CLAC’s radical position of waging war on capitalism. CLAC contributed to the student strike by participating in many street actions and the relationship between CLAC and CLASSE seems to have been convenient and mutually beneficial. CLAC is an example of the autonomous affinity group model of political action that contributes to the dynamism of more organized political movements like the student strike and may produce a radicalizing influence on participants. Furthermore, some of the actions of CLAC participants would have been too controversial to be openly endorsed by CLASSE and yet helped to increase the pressure on the government. The autonomous nature of these actions meant that CLASSE could benefit from this situation without bearing the blame or recrimination of those opposed to more confrontational methods.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> At least this was the case prior to the passing of Bill 78, which included a clause that holds student leaders and student associations responsible if they do not adequately prevent their members from breaking it. In this way autonomous actions by particular individuals and groups could be used to criminalize the student strike and student organizations. Bill 78 can be read online: <<http://www.bloquonslahausse.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Document-explicatif-Loi-78-v2.pdf>>.

The explicit anti-capitalist position of CLAC, the confrontational tactics it favours, and its similarly non-negotiable stance may lead us to conclude that they represent a more radical position than CLASSE. However, I would argue that the limits of the anti-capitalist vision of CLAC is that on its own it can too easily be dismissed as impossible and utopian. According to Slavoj Žižek, the ‘great art of politics is to insist on a particular demand that, while thoroughly realist, feasible and legitimate, disturbs the core of the hegemonic ideology’ (ŽIŽEK, 2012). While CLAC’s tactics provoke a police response, they do not force those in power to take them into any further account, whereas the CLASSE presented a position that was truly impossible both to grant and to ignore. Their demands were completely incompatible with the ‘necessity’ of neoliberal markets, yet at the same time were so modestly and concretely possible within the terms of a social imaginary that values the well-being of people.<sup>15</sup> It was this latter dimension that made them truly compelling and a serious problem for the existing power structure. It was this that prevented them from being credibly dismissed as ‘mere noise’ even though the government and the mainstream media certainly tried (BARNEY, 2012). Ultimately, showing itself capable of meeting those in power and presenting demands that were conceivable and yet non-negotiable was more disruptive than dismissing the process entirely.

The negotiations between the students and the government served as a staging ground for the students’ alternative conception of politics. CLASSE disrupted the negotiation process by simply being unable to conform to its model while nevertheless maintaining its direct democratic procedures and insisting (with the force of over 100,000 of its members on strike) that it be included. The negotiations were stalled at times since CLASSE’s negotiating team did not have independent decision-making power and so had to consult the congress before moving forward in negotiations. While the government tried to paint this as an example of the students’ intransigence, the delays served as an opportunity for CLASSE to highlight its own democratic structures and contrast these to the government’s way of functioning. Furthermore, it gave CLASSE a platform to contest dominant interpretations of the events. For example, immediately prior to the initial round of negotiations *the government tried to exclude CLASSE by demanding they renounce all ‘violence on the*

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<sup>15</sup>The ‘reasonableness’ of the students’ position was further emphasized by the way that CLASSE proposed, in a satirical reflection of the five-year tuition increase, that its plan to tax banks be introduced in intervals of 0.14% over five years to allow the banks time to adjust.

*part of protesters' before negotiations would begin.* Rather than reinforce the government's presumption that CLASSE was 'violent' by refusing to comply, or rather than weaken the movement and reinforce internal divisions by renouncing a portion of the protesters who chose more confrontational tactics, the congress passed a more specific motion that renounced deliberate physical violence against persons except in cases of legitimate self-defense (CLASSE, 2012, p. 2). The motion therefore differentiated between harm to individuals and property destruction and applied equally to the police as well as protesters while demonstrating that most of the violence was instigated by the police. A second motion was also passed at the same meeting which affirmed CLASSE's support for civil disobedience and denounced police repression of protesters as well as the systemic violence that inheres in an educational institution that excludes people on the basis of their socio-economic status. In this way, CLASSE refused to undermine their principles or ideals yet refused to be ignored or excluded. They insisted that their confrontational tactics be treated as legitimate – avoiding both collaboration and utopianism.

### **Neighbourhood Assemblies and the Difficulty of Expanding the Movement**

Within the student milieu CLASSE was very effective in mobilizing students to support the tactic of the general strike and its vision of public education. However, at a certain point it became evident that if the students were to achieve their ultimate aims they would require the active support of the non-student population as well. Three months into the strike, CLASSE began to publicly call for a social strike. While major unions issued statements of solidarity with the student cause, in the end they did not commit to meaningful action, such as a one-day strike, which would have increased the pressure on the government. A proliferation of grassroots citizens' groups did mobilize around the student cause and later against the anti-protest law known as Bill 78. These included *Mères en Colère*, *Profs Contra la Hausse*, CLAC, *La Coalition Opposée à la Tarification et la Privatisation des Services Publics*, and Occupy Montreal. The protests also attracted civil rights activists, anti-police brutality groups, environmental activists, Quebec nationalists, opposition party supporters, and in one notable demonstration, 400 lawyers critical of Bill 78. The high points of this support for the movement could be seen in the massive marches on the 22nd of each month that attracted crowds of hundreds of thousands, the

extensive spread of the red square symbol in storefronts, on balconies, and affixed to people's clothing, and the *manifs des casseroles* that broke out for two weeks in May.

The *manifs des casseroles* in particular captured the imagination of many due to their spontaneity, carnivalesque atmosphere, and decentralized emergence. However, the intensity of these two weeks could not last indefinitely, and the politicization that the experience may have provoked among city residents required some form of organization for these localized movements to become the basis of ongoing mobilization. An encouraging development in this direction occurred when some casseroles participants began to form neighbourhood general assemblies. The most active of these assemblies organized their own autonomous demonstrations once the *manifs des casseroles* died down. While in the short term these kinds of neighbourhood initiatives lent political urgency to the student cause, they soon shrank in size until they consisted of only a core group of the most committed participants. A similar dynamic appears to have occurred in other contexts where struggles became localized. For example, Héloïse Nez remarked on how a shift from the central plazas to neighbourhood assemblies in Spain likewise resulted in a general demobilization of the broader population who had been attracted to the original site, leaving them to be sustained by a few of the most radical and dedicated participants (NEZ, 2013).

One of the reasons for the decline of this kind of neighbourhood organization is the fact that assemblies are exceptional political instances that occur apart from everyday activities and relationships. Student associations, in contrast, exist for reasons that are not strictly political but also serve the particular needs of their members. They provide social, academic, and professional resources on an ongoing basis and are integrated with everyday lives, activities and spaces used by students. Regardless of whether or not an urgent political struggle demands attention, students feel compelled to maintain the student associations. Neighbourhood assemblies, on the other hand, require people to actively step out of their everyday routines and participate in a political project. The shared interests of a neighbourhood are generally more tenuous, less cohesive, and more difficult to organize.<sup>16</sup> Massive horizontalist movements are more likely to be effective and sustained over time if they are based in workplaces, cultural associations, churches, or other

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<sup>16</sup>The breakfast program organized by the Black Panthers in the 1960s are an interesting counter example of a highly politicized organization that found a way to serve a distinct need in their communities and thereby broaden their base of support.

community organizations that already congregate people on a regular basis and serve particular economic, social, or cultural needs. In order to be politically significant these kinds of existing institutions would need to understand themselves as having distinct political concerns beyond their original purposes.

A final difficulty faced by spontaneous neighbourhood assemblies is that total autonomy and decentralization can leave each assembly unmoored and isolated from the larger movement. The student movement is able to sustain momentum within a fairly decentralized structure by also working to coordinate at a national level. While syndicalism privileges local autonomy and initiative and the ideal is for local associations to take the lead in self-organizing direct actions, in reality this can only be approximated by the most highly politicized associations or during periods of intense mobilization. For this reason, ASSÉ argues for the importance of national coordination and an organizational structure that can bring associations into a more permanent relation with one another. This kind of coordination can provide resources and greater momentum to smaller or less politicized associations and give them access to a broader network of support. If meaningful democratic spaces are not felt to exist, as in OWS, then neighbourhood GAs can be valuable in themselves. However, democratic practice can also become undermined if they lack a connection to a sizable movement that makes collective action effective and gives purpose to the time and energy committed to direct democracy.

The 2012 student strike ended on September 5, one day after premier Jean Charest was voted out of office and the incoming Parti Québécois leader Pauline Marois followed through on her election promise to cancel the tuition increase and annul Bill 78.<sup>17</sup> Many considered this victory – while only temporary and partial in light of the larger demand for tuition-free education – to be a direct result of the student mobilization. On the other hand, the election is also blamed for demobilizing students before they had achieved deeper institutional changes in the funding models of the education system. A parallel with May 68 in France can

<sup>17</sup>Marois would later hold an ‘Education Summit’ on February 25-26, 2013, that was strongly criticized by ASSÉ and boycotted for excluding any discussion of a tuition free system. The summit resulted in a decision to index tuition costs to inflation. Since student income, scholarships and aid were not likewise linked to inflation this resulted in a slight tuition increase. While much smaller than that proposed by the preceding Liberal government, the increase reveals the degree to which the PQ is committed to the same neoliberal tendencies of its predecessors and only cancelled the original increase out of opportunism, not due to any commitment to social democratic principles of free education.

be made in this regard as an election was similarly used to undermine the legitimacy of the movement through majoritarian parliamentary democracy. ASSÉ's annual campaign for 2012/13 in the post-strike period was appropriately centered on pushing for free education in order to make clear the limited nature of this success.

Although Bill 78 was annulled by the PQ government, a Montreal municipal bylaw that was introduced at the same time, law P-6, continues to criminalize protests that do not provide an itinerary to police 8 hours in advance. A federal law was introduced in 2013 that punishes the wearing of masks during a 'riot' with ten years in prison. Police have used law P-6 to kettle protest gatherings before they have even begun and give out tickets of over six hundred dollars. During the general strike, CLASSE encouraged people to continue to assemble and protest in the face of Bill 78. The massive number of people in the streets empowered people to break this new law and prevented police from successfully enacting it. However, in the period of general demobilization following the strike a more militant core of Montreal activists who continue to demonstrate have become more vulnerable to the force of the legal system. It remains to be seen how future mobilization campaigns will deal with the increasing state repression of activism.

Perhaps the more significant success of this movement in the longer term is that in the aftermath of the general strike ASSÉ doubled its size from 35,000 to 70,000 members. In the two years following, it continues to grow with 80,000 members as of April 2014 (BONIN, 2014, p. 12). This increase in affiliations was primarily a result of the experience of the student associations who joined CLASSE and were introduced to the practices of combative syndicalism. The massive mobilization, endurance, and ultimate cancelling of the tuition increase that this struggle enabled served as a powerful endorsement of student syndicalism. The increase in affiliations has further strengthened ASSÉ's ability to create a permanent relation of force with the state. Even during the post-strike period of low mobilization ASSÉ continued to expand its base and managed to mobilize thousands for a one-day strike and boycott against Marois' education summit in spring 2013 due to the refusal of the PQ to include free tuition as a topic of discussion. On April 3, 2014, ASSÉ organized a national day of action against austerity that saw 60,000 participating in a one-day strike and tens of thousands demonstrating in what was the largest demonstration outside of a general strike period in the history of student syndicalism in Quebec. This mobilizing capability allows the students to define the

terms of their struggle rather than be dependent on the actions of those in power, ensuring that future conflicts occur according to a timing that benefits the movement.

In light of the difficulty that the students encountered in expanding the 2012 strike into a genuine social strike, the recent campaigns of ASSÉ focus on broadening their base of support by reinforcing relationships with other progressive organizations and unions. The 2013/14 campaign against austerity sought to connect the cuts to education to a more generalized attack on the public good. It encompassed a broad critique of the rationale behind austerity policies while highlighting their negative effects on education, healthcare, environmental protection, women, and workers. At the 2014 Annual Congress ASSÉ decided that the campaign theme for 2014/15 would be public services, and this, in order to coincide with the contract negotiations of public sector workers occurring in 2015.

ASSÉ's recent campaigns clearly reveal how the political ideals of student syndicalism exceed student concerns and lend its force to more generalized social struggles against neoliberal policies and for more equal and democratic societies. Their highly developed democratic procedures and structures, based on local autonomy, could help teach the contemporary workers' movement how to reinvigorate its base. Collaboration between students and workers could form the basis of what Badiou (2012, p. 31) describes as 'a new subjective type' and 'the creation of new a type of popular unity, heedless of state stratifications and resulting from seemingly disparate subjective trajectories.' ASSÉ is planning to build up to an unlimited general strike for free tuition in 2017/18. The struggle continues.

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