

# The Quebec Student Strike

## Red Squares, Black Flags And Casseroles

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The 2012 Quebec student general strike lasted for six months, between February and September. Participation peaked at around 300,000 out of 420,000 university and CEGEP (junior colleges) students in the province. During the high points, demonstrations took to the streets multiple times daily with growing militancy met with rampant police violence, especially during marches taking place after dark.

The symbol of the strike was a red square. People supporting the strike pinned small red squares to their clothes and hung large ones on their balconies and spray painted them on sidewalks and buildings.

Government legislation attempting to end the strike only increased street presence. Though the strike has ended, 500 people face criminal charges and thousands more were issued tickets, most often for illegal assembly.

In March 2011, when a tuition hike was announced in the governing Quebec Liberal Party's budget, the push for a strike started. Opposition began almost immediately as students occupied university administration offices; the following November tens of thousands went on strike for a day and many took to the streets.

In February 2012, an unlimited general strike commenced. Strike votes began during the first week with 20,000 students voting to strike. For months there were demonstrations, blockades, and three occupations as well as constant strike-related activity, including mobilisation for more strike votes, blocking and disrupting classes, semi-nude marches, creative projects such as art, banner-making, and knitting, and strike sleepovers.

The first serious injury occurred during the first month of the strike. On March 7, students occupied an office while supporters faced riot police outside the building. The cops used three sound grenades, the first time during the strike, and injuries resulting from one of them caused a demonstrator to lose sight in one eye.

Demonstrations were largely spontaneous with no pre-determined route or organizer, and this set the tone throughout the strike. Mobilization was so strong that demonstrations could be called as little as an hour ahead of time and hundreds of people would show up. This meant there was little to no ownership of demonstrations and no established leaders in the streets.

By March 22, 316,000 out of 420,000 students in Quebec were on strike (some just for the day). 250,000 students and non-students took to the streets of downtown Montreal to mark the first month anniversary of the strike in



March in support of the 2012 Quebec student strike. Banner reads, "When injustice is the law; resistance is our duty."

what would become a strike tradition, as from March onwards, the 22<sup>nd</sup> of each month was marked by giant demonstrations. It became obvious that a lot of people weren't in the streets just because of student related issues, as their banners and signs carried messages about many different social issues.

Taking place during the day, often with a large, visible anarchist presence, these demos often had a festive atmosphere, moving slowly and creating a space where parents, children, non-status people, and others needing to avoid police violence could feel relatively safe as these were some of the few times during the strike where police intervention was minimal.

Based on how past strikes had gone, in March many people expected the government and the student associations to start making progress in negotiations. With this in mind, the CLASSE, an anarchist-influenced student federation, called for a week of economic disruptions, with targeted demonstrations up to five times each day. Most actions were organized anonymously or through student associations. The CLASSE itself did little of the organizing and served mostly to centralize information on their website.

Militancy rose among demonstrators and pressure on the government increased through economic blockades. Targets for blockades included bridges, the Banque Nationale headquarters, highways, the province-run liquor retailer, and office buildings. The fancy Hotel Queen Elizabeth and the Education Minister's office were trashed.

By the end of March, demonstrations were taking to the streets daily. Masks, to protect participants from profiling and chemical irritants, and Maalox mixed with water to wash out eyes after being pepper-sprayed, became normalized necessities. It was during this time that the strike and those participating seemed to increasingly be waging war on capitalism and the government rather than just the tuition hike.

Consecutive nightly demonstrations started in mid-April when the CLASSE was kicked out of the first round of government negotiations; the other student unions walked out in solidarity. These night demonstrations continued until mid-August, often roaming around downtown Montreal with militant blocs smashing bank windows and confronting the police.

Three key days around this time were the demonstrations against the Plan Nord job recruitment event in April, May Day, and the ruling Liberal Party meeting in Victoriaville.

The Plan Nord, the \$80 billion Quebec government plan to further colonize northern Quebec and allow companies to devastate it for resources, has met considerable opposition from indigenous people living in that region. The demonstration was notable for being the first time people had seen Montreal cops run from protesters under a hail of rocks and bottles, and one of the first times that it became obvious that a lot of people weren't in the streets just because of student related issues.

The streets were filled with black and green flags and one of the many demonstrations called for this day had been organized by an indigenous solidarity group that was not affiliated with any of the student associations. This demonstration was also the first time the police of Montreal handed over the reigns to the provincial police who arrested 90 protestors.

This trend continued in Victoriaville, a small town an hour outside of Montreal, as the Quebec provincial police fought to maintain some semblance of order during a meeting of the Liberal Party and its supporters by spraying mass amounts of teargas and shooting rubber bullets indiscriminately. Injuries from this demonstration included the second serious eye injury of the strike, as well as someone suffering a coma after being hit in the head by a rubber bullet.

Squeezed in the middle of these two actions was Montreal's annual anti-capitalist May Day demonstration. Two May Day marches occur annually in Montreal, one organized by the unions and the other by an anti-capitalist coalition. Unlike at Plan Nord and The Battle of Victo, as Victoriaville came to be known, the anti-capitalist May Day demo ended early in the evening because of innovative police tactics that were unlike anything else seen during the strike despite the presence of one of the biggest Black Blocs until this demo.

People, however, were not just fighting the cops in the streets. Pickets and class disruptions continued on all the universities and CEGEPs where the strike was still in effect. In response, the provincial courts started issuing injunctions at the request of anti-strike students. At least 38 were issued, making it illegal for demonstrators to stop students from attending class. In practice, it meant that riot police began breaking up picket lines outside of schools, often spraying chemical irritants and causing administrators to close down the schools anyway.

Negotiations between student federation spokespersons and the government started up and broke down twice as the atmosphere in the streets became more and more militant. The connections between what was happening in the streets and what was happening at the negotiating table are complicated, but suffice it to say that riots in the streets sometimes lead to the government being more willing to negotiate and when negotiations stalled or stopped, the atmosphere in the streets changed accordingly.

In May, the Liberal Party provincial government passed what became known as Special Law 78, which, among other things, made gatherings of more than 50 people illegal unless the participants gave their route and time line to the police in advance. It also imposed heavy fines on student associations who advocated striking and banned demonstrations within a certain distance of a university campus.

Finally, the law ended the semester for striking students and set the date for a return to class for a shortened term in August. Students were essentially locked out of their classes and the struggle moved from the university campuses to the neighbourhoods of Montreal and surrounding areas. Immediate responses to this law also included three days of militant demonstrations involving molotov cocktails, widespread use of masks (The Montreal city council had just passed an anti-mask law), and demonstrators bravely rushing police lines to break open kettles (when the police encircle a group of protesters in preparation for a mass arrest).

Within a week daily spontaneous neighbourhood demonstrations began. Called casseroles, these demonstrations were a practice borrowed from Latin America where participants bang on pots and pans in the streets. They were followed by autonomous neighbourhood assemblies to support the strike, where non-students stepped up their involvement in the struggle, creating legal support committees and calling for a general strike.

In early August, Quebec Premier Jean Charest called an election for the beginning of September, many people realized that the strike was coming up against its biggest challenge yet. After months of direct democracy and autonomous organizing, students would have to decide whether or not they trusted government enough to surrender their power in the streets and face the polls instead. When the shortened semester began on August 13, many were gearing up for a return to the streets, but as the first few students returned to their general assemblies, the votes started coming back negative. Students were returning to class.

The election took place on September 4. The Parti Quebecois (PQ) won a minority government and Charest lost his seat in the provincial parliament and subsequently his position as head of the Liberal Party. Pauline Marois, the new premier of Quebec, canceled the tuition hike, pending a summit on university education. She also repealed the part of Law 78 that dealt with demonstrations, though it is unclear if this includes the restrictions on organizing strikes on university campuses.

The strike died for a few key reasons. One was burn-out. The non-stop strike activity took its toll and many found themselves emotionally and physically needing a break. Police brutality and the courts also played their part. Next, the suspension of the semester due to Law 78 resulted in a lock-out during the summer, which meant a critical loss of momentum. Then, the election came along, and many people decided to put their trust in government, campaign against the Liberal Party and return to class.

Clearly, as anarchists, we think the struggle is far from over. The PQ only repealed Law 78 and the tuition hike in an act of political opportunism, and will have its own brand of austerity measures and anti-immigrant legislation. Arrests from the strike total in the thousands. Trials will stretch on for years.

Some are still under severe restrictions, including three people who were exiled from Montreal, and many others who face curfews, non-association, and other conditions. We've had a taste of what it's like to be in the streets every day, what it feels like when cops turn and run from us, what we can accomplish with our friends and strangers alike.

We can't erase the downfalls of the strike; namely, the lack of anti-colonial, anti-racist sentiment outside a dedicated minority, the reliance on democratic structures, and the inherent reformism of a strike against a tuition hike even when accompanied by the demand to end the commodification of education.

Things can never return to normal, even though classes started again. For many of us, the struggle began before the 2012 strike and it continues in its wake.

This was never just about free education.

# fifth Estate

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