

ULTIMATUM

EXPRESS

Newsletter of the Association pour une Solidarité Syndicale Étudiante

December 6, 2007 - English Special no. 3

November's Student Strike: Our First Step Forward

Lorenzo Fiorito

- University of Alberta Graduate, Worker -

Over 60,000 students across Quebec walked out of classes on November 14, 15, and 16. They demanded free, quality, accessible education through a massive reinvestment, the abolition of anti-strike Law C-43, and the establishment of government-funded daycare for student parents. These demands were not sweetheart deals for the government, nor were they a sugar-coated attempt to do nothing while the education system crumbles. They were objectives for the student movement, and goals for Quebec as a whole.

The three-day strike was not without its problems. The media pulled out all the stops to make the strikers look bad. When students at Vieux-Montreal and UQAM were attacked by police, the violence was blamed on the strikers. At Dawson College, the media tried to make it look like nothing much was going on - trying to hide from the public that the anglophone-francophone division in the student movement is breaking down before our eyes. Nonetheless, thousands of students from across Quebec gathered in the streets of Montreal, closing

downtown traffic by the weight of their numbers, demanding that the government listen. This was only the beginning.

Now that the strike is over, there are further challenges. The strike movement needs more internal unity in order to give the next strike more political weight. The anglophone network, now in place, must become stronger and better organized in order to win elections and unite student unions into a common federation with francophone schools.

The demonstration on November 22 to "keep the freeze" shows that there are hundreds of thousands of students, represented by the FECQ and the FEUQ, who are not represented properly by their elected leaders. A contingent of free-education supporters who wanted to show their support for the demonstration were first blocked from joining the other students, even physically sexually harassed at one point! This only shows that the leaders of these unions are afraid that the demand for free education will have an effect on their rank and file,

and that they'll be forced to listen to the students they represent.

The demand to keep the freeze is a cynical play on the part of these "union leaders" to look like they have done something - without endangering their political links with the Parti Québécois. These students need proper representation - and they won't get it without our help.

Above all, the student movement must join hands with the labour movement - those who have the real power in society - in order to turn our protests into effective, concrete activity that changes society. This is how our society works. Ordinary people don't get anything out of the government unless they organize, work together, and show their strength in the streets. For thousands of students who had never been on strike before, this strike was a great education in democracy, and a stepping stone for future successes.

The movement continues this winter!

Why Does the Media Hate Strikers?

Joel Bergman

- Worker -

On November 13th, the Dawson Student Union held a general assembly where Dawson students voted almost unanimously in favor of joining the three-day strike for free education. The 115 student quorum required for the general assembly to function was shattered, with more than 700 students packing into the room, and more waiting outside. This general assembly was, by far, the DSU's most successful meeting ever called. This, however, is not the impression you get when taking a look at the mainstream press.

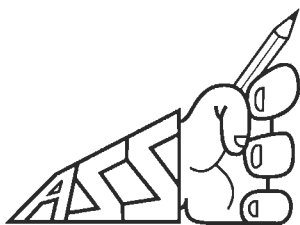
The front page story in the Thursday edition of the Quebec newspaper *The Gazette* was about the student strike, with the centre piece being the Dawson College strike. You only have to take a quick glance at the front page to see the clear bias of this newspaper. The picture is not even of the Dawson strikers, but of a two-person counter protest! The official numbers from the DSU are that 748 students attended the general assembly. The most generous number I have seen from the mainstream press

are that there were only 400 students present with some papers even stating that the attendance was as low as 100! The papers have portrayed the strike movement as a gang of violent radicals who somehow subverted democracy and imposed their ideas on a bunch of ignorant students. Activists involved in the strike movement must be scratching their heads, wondering how the facts could be so easily distorted.

Not coincidentally, this sort of thing is not a new phenomenon. The media always treats left-wing movements with hostility. This comes not from any sort of "objective" view point, but clearly from their role as private corporations. Left-wing movements in general place human life above that of corporate profit, thus threatening the profits of any private corporation. Canada is vastly rich in resources and productive capability with a GDP of over 1 trillion dollars. With this in mind, free education is easily affordable. The problem is that this wealth is in the hands of a few dozen corporations who control the

Canadian economy and don't want to share even though we, as workers, have produced all of it. "Freedom of the Press" exists only for those who own the press, and for those who own the press, the movement for free education is a threat to their bottom line.

The corporate media's main goal is to paint the strike movement as violent, undemocratic, and widely unpopular. This misinformation gives a bad name to the strike, thus preventing the movement from spreading to teachers, workers, and other parts of society. The fact of the matter is that with a media that is fundamentally undemocratic, you are going to see reporting that is extremely biased in the favor of those who control the media, who incidentally are the same people who hold massive influence with the government. Fighting for free education means fighting all these interests: but with solidarity and effective networks - between students, teachers, and working people - **we can win.**



Association pour une Solidarité
Syndicale Étudiante (ASSÉ)

(514) 390-0110

<http://www.asse-solidarite.qc.ca>

Pour joindre le Comité journal :
ultimatum@asse-solidarite.qc.ca

Student Strike at Dawson

Isaak Nalpatian

- Dawson Student -

Over 700 students overwhelmingly came out to vote at Dawson's last General Assembly. Because of the surprisingly large turnout, Conrod's was uncomfortably full: many students had to stand, while others got to sit on the floor. The main focus of the event was, of course, the strike, as concerned students came out to help the fight against rising tuition. Free education, through a massive reinvestment in the education system, was the main demand.

Although the bureaucrats directing the General Assembly were not at all well organized, students stuck it out in the unbearable conditions to get in their "YES" vote. Much controversy has surrounded this anticipated event. But in the end, we can honestly say it was a success, considering that those who opposed this course of action were forced to do what students, the body of the Dawson Student Union, voted for.

Common Front, a group dedicated to fighting capitalist exploitation and defending the rights of students, organized the three-day Dawson strike in the face of initial opposition from the DSU's executives: it was only

after the execs were handed such a huge majority that they devoted themselves to the strike. Because of the unconstitutional lack of cooperation by the executive, many were left in the dark about the real issues. The fact of the matter was, and still is; education is a human right. The government, instead of providing billion-dollar tax cut to rich corporations, should invest in the social systems that build a strong, well-educated society. In Quebec, some 60,000 students went on strike or walked out, sending the message to Charest that the people of this country will not stand for this kind of blatant irresponsibility.

At Dawson, a 95% majority raised their hands after the question "All in favour?" Were there those who just wanted a short vacation? If so, why didn't Dawson students vote to go on strike in 2005? The extremely high turnout, and the massive majority, were both caused by the fact that the crisis in education funding affects Dawson students, and because of the dedicated efforts of a handful of organizers. Students have discovered that they can fight back.

This was the first strike that Common Front had ever coordinated, and the organizers did fail to plan in advance a proper picket line that could close down the school. This was something that should have been discussed throughout the mobilization at Dawson. Because of Common Front's mistake, many students stayed at home, thinking that this was enough. What was needed was a strong picket line which would have forced the administration to shut down the entire school. Regrettably, this did not happen and in response to the poor turnout at the pickets, the administration began to threaten students and teachers who did not show up these three days.

Overall, mistakes were made, lessons were learned: but the fight continues. Next semester, action will resume and strikes and protests will once again make the news. We will not tire until the battle is won and government realizes that we have the final say.

Remember, you only have as many rights as you're willing to fight for!

Can't Afford Education?

Hari Darmawan

- McGill Student -

The question of education accessibility is often brushed aside with the argument that student loans are easily available. There are governmental student loans and private student loans from banks; enough loans to make sure that each person can enjoy education regardless of their income and economic background.

While we're on the subject, let me tell you about other loans available to us. There are loans for furniture, electronic appliances, 60-inch HDTVs, houses (i.e. mortgages), cars, etc. That magical MasterCard in our wallet, that is the pinnacle of loans as there is no limit to what we can afford. With credit and loans, our society seems to have become a just society where each person has an equal opportunity to enjoy all the luxuries of the world.

Therefore, there is no reason for us to demand accessible education through lowering tuition fees, let alone demanding free education. Furthermore, there is no reason for workers to demand higher wages - because there are always loans available.

There's Always a Student Loan!

The only catch is that you have to pay back the loan, with an exorbitant interest rate. A loan is a loan, it is not a give-away. Someone has to pay for it. This is exactly what has been missing in the debate on student loans and accessible education.

A study done by the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation found that in 2006, 55% of all graduating students have resorted to debt in order to finish their education, and the average student debt is \$24,000. This is just half of the picture. Using the Loan Repayment Calculator from the National Student Loan Service Centre, at a current prime-rate of 6.25% (from which additional 5% interest has to be added), for a loan of \$24,000 you will be paying \$334 monthly for 10 years, totaling to \$40,080. This means that you will be paying a total interest of \$16,080 from a principal loan of \$24,000; that is 67% interest! This is akin to borrowing money from a loan-shark.

Student loans are usually paid after we graduate and find ourselves a job. On aver-

age, we work 160 hours a month. For a monthly payment of \$334, that means about \$2 set aside from our hourly wage for 10 years. In other words, an average student loan is a wage-cut of \$2/hour for the next 10 years! This is a fact that most students often overlook and it only becomes a harsh reality once students graduate and enter the workforce. Thus, tuition fee increases means a wage-cut, it is an attack against the workers; whereas a demand for free education means a demand for a wage-increase.

Suffice it to say, a loan is a loan. It has to be paid eventually, with interest. Student loans are not the solution to the problem of accessible education. On the contrary, this only serves as a distraction. We have to demand our government provide us with free accessible quality education, not through student loans, but through abolishing tuition fees and massive reinvestment in education. Our government has the resources to do so, what is lacking is the political will.