

The Escalation of Tactics: An interview with the leaders of the Quebec Student Strike

by Nick Taylor

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Almost two years of strategizing by a dedicated coalition of student organizers preceded the 2012 Quebec student strikes, a galvanizing series of events, which through fate and design, would morph into ‘the biggest act of civil disobedience in Canadian History.’

On May 22nd 2012, the hundredth day of a surprisingly militant student strike, over 300,000 people took to the streets of Montreal for a large-scale *manif* (demonstration) that led to conflicts with police, became international news and put the student cause front and centre in the Quebec conversation. For context, 300,000 people is roughly a quarter of the population of the city. Over the following months symbols such as the felt ‘red square’ and terms such as ‘casserole’ would become part of Canadian discourse and marches and rallies were held in solidarity all over the world. A fight over a tuition hike had become caught up in a greater economic justice movement.

However, like the Arab Spring twelve months prior, the greatest misconception surrounding the events in Montreal was the perception of the protests as a spontaneous social movement that erupted into the global consciousness. In fact, the groundwork behind the strikes, and to some extent the subsequent social actions, had been organized for years prior by a coalition of highly mobilized student activists and student union leaders.

I met **Jérémie Bédard-Wien**, the acting spokesman of CLASSE, the most militant of the student federations, and **Ludvic Moquin-Beaudry** (CLASSE’s communications secretary) at café on rue

St. Denis in early August. CEGEP (college) classes had just resumed after an uncertain summer for the movement. The school break had naturally diminished the student population in the city in terms of getting bodies in the street; Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois, the former CLASSE spokesman, had recently stepped down, citing a need for “fresh faces” in the leadership (as CLASSE’s most recognizable leader, Nadeau-Dubois had personally been targeted by the Charest government and felt the need to take a “long respite from these attacks”) and of course, looming over everything was the upcoming provincial election, set for September 4th. The polls predict a tight election.

The PLQ (*Parti Liberal du Quebec*), in power since 2003, was mired in corruption scandals and Premier Jean Charest was widely seen as enemy no. 1 of the student movement. The PQ (*Parti Quebecois*), the nationalist, centre-left party, had made concessions to the student movement – promising to freeze tuition – but student leaders were naturally skeptical. The debate to work politically or to continue to push a more radical mandate was something all the student leaders and activists were struggling with...

ORGANIZING COALITIONS AND STRATEGIES

Nick Taylor – Can you give some background on the CLASSE organization?

Ludvic Moquin-Beaudry – CLASSE was founded in December of last year (2011) in provision for the strike. It’s a coalition that was founded by ASSE (*Association pour un Solidarité Syndicale Étudiante*.) The “CL” (Coalition Large) at the beginning means a broad coalition of ASSE. I was involved with ASSE (previously) but not as an executive, more as an activist in my own student associations, more on the ground. The strike campaign itself has been prepared for two years before the strike. The mobilization started in 2010 when they (the PLQ government) announced there would be a (tuition) hike. Then, in the 2011 budget, they announced the amount and that’s what really kicked the mobilization.

NT – So it’s been strategized for a while?

LMB – Yes, and that’s what people from the outside don’t realize is that we’ve built a mass movement but we had a long reckoning. The preparation for this started long ago. We’ve inspired some other student organizations from the rest of Canada and even in the US, but when we see them the first thing we tell them is that you need good structures and you need a long preparation before having such a strike.

Jérémie Bédard-Wien – It’s called the escalation of tactics. Every step during that escalation justifies the next one. You start with very small actions, small protests, petitions, easy stuff but very empowering stuff and at the same time you build structures that are empowering in themselves – general assemblies and structures of direct democracy. After several months each action that we held drew more and more people in, people that were ready to go back to their campuses and mobilize further towards the next action, or for the basic principle. We were constantly mobilizing over two years - not only for events - when there weren’t any events you mobilize for the issues themselves. Every morning you would see people leafleting in front of campuses for over two years, really. It takes a lot of dedication but it worked.

NT – You knew the tuition increases were coming, you didn't know how much, but you started preparing...

JBW – The tuition increase was announced in 2010 but they weren't going into effect until 2012 so this worked in our favor because we now had some time. You cannot build a strong social movement in a few weeks or months... so we used that time effectively to increase pressure. As time wore on and the government did not respond to our pressure we were able to justify direct action, we were able to justify larger protests and on November 10, 2011 we held the final protest prior to the unlimited general strike, which drew in about 30,000 people, which was quite an achievement at that time... we hadn't foreseen the big protests that would happen. At that moment, as the government did not respond to the ultimatum that was issued during that protest, we were able to say to students "we've tried everything and now we have to move on to the next step" which was, in our case, the unlimited general strike, and we had done a lot of prior organizing work on the national level as well given that there are several national student unions in Quebec.

We were able to hold a summit in May of 2011 to which all student unions in Quebec were invited to show up and we basically decided on a series of principles which would direct the collaboration between the national student unions, basically insuring ourselves that the mistakes that were committed in the past that breached solidarity between the student unions would not be repeated. At that point, Nov 10, we were ready to go on to the unlimited general strike. Now, core activists in Quebec knew two years ago that this was going to be necessary but of course your basic student who is going to vote on a strike ballot one day does not, and that's why you have to go through all these other steps.

THE STRIKE

Quebec, unlike most of North America, is no stranger to student strikes. The first occurred in 1958, actually predating the "Quiet Revolution" that modernized and redeveloped the political landscape of the province in the early 1960s:

LMB – It was a strike at Université de Montreal, a one or two day strike in order to get free education and to open the doors of universities to lower and middle class people. Though they didn't succeed they gave pace to the coming decades.

In 1968, no doubt inspired by the student demonstrations in Paris that year, a far more effective student strike occurred, one that helped completely reorganize the educational model in Quebec. The Université of Quebec network of 'public universities' was created, as was the CEGEP system, which acts as a heavily subsidized stepping stone between high school and University or the workforce. Both systems created by far the most affordable post secondary education in the country. Despite (or perhaps because of) this victory student strikes became something of a tradition in Quebec over the next decades.

Moquin-Beaudry goes on: "there were two strikes in 1974 on two different issues; one in 1978, one in 1986, one in 1990, one in 1996 and one in 2005, so there's a history of student strikes in

Quebec... [unlike English Canada] we are closer to the European/French culture of going out in the streets to demand what we want.”*So the 2012 student strike was not an unfamiliar occurrence. The strength of it, however, took even the organizers by surprise:*

JBW – We did not expect it (the strike) to be as large or as long. We had high expectations for the strike and we planned the calendar of general assemblies so that this would work because, as with every national movement, if one union pulls out or fails a strike vote early on it could have a very bad effect on the other strike votes. We didn’t have a national strike ballot in one day. The local unions, which are sovereign of course, plan their own general assembly (but) we tried to have the more radical unions jump in first so that it would have a catalyzing effect on the others.

We expected the strike to end in early April. March 22 was a very important date for us. We had a big demonstration held by all four national student unions (CLASSE, FEUQ [*Federation étudiante Universitaire du Québec*], FECQ [*Federation étudiante Collégiale du Québec*], and TACeQ [*Table de concertation étudiante du Québec*].) This was a day in which we were to demonstrate the obvious public support and mobilization around the tuition hike and would see Charest finally negotiate an end to the conflict. This did not happen. But the strike votes held which was quite amazing. (They) held after Mar 22, held after the first round of negotiations, which resulted in a fairly bad offer being offered. They held throughout April, they held throughout May and so the government had to resort to a special law and at that point there were nightly demonstrations, there were casserole demonstrations slowly starting to happen and this really became a popular movement.

BILL 78 AND THE WIDENING OF THE MOVEMENT

With the strike actions becoming more and more militant and with no progress at the bargaining table, Education minister Line Beauchamp resigned on May 14th and, four days later, Bill 78 was passed by the Charest government. The bill would suspend the winter semester at the eleven universities and 14 CEGEPs where students were striking. Most controversially it also restricted the methods of assembly and protest, requiring any demonstration of more than 50 people to submit to the police the dates, times and places of such protests among other laws that severely restricted the students right to assembly. The backlash against the bill was widespread. The government had introduced legislation that, to many, was an undemocratic act of repression. The manif organized for May 22nd, just a few days later would become the watershed moment of the demonstrations.

LMB – Because the May 22 demo came four days after the passing of bill 78 there was a big uproar and the timing was perfect to have a big demo. I never make estimates in advance because we’re always surprised – on the morning of May 22nd we were expecting 50,000 people and in the end it turned out to be 250,000-300,000, depending on who you ask, so we don’t make predictions any more.

NT – It seems Bill 78 actually galvanized the opposition to Charest.

JBW – Absolutely. It was supposed to be a bill which would restore social peace, law and order. It was supposed to quell protest and of course the only thing it amounted to in the end was to

increase the level of popular anger and increase the protests. The government's refusal to negotiate, and refusal to negotiate on fair terms and to make sensible offers to students has served only to galvanize generally anger towards them, and this is why the strikes are renewed.

After May 22, protests continued daily and the casserole demos (the banging of pots and pans) against Bill 78 began occurring throughout the streets of Montreal and also, in solidarity, in cities and towns across North America.

NT – Did the casseroles happen organically or was it a tactic?

JBW – It was someone's idea and it's been used historically, notably in Chile, but no, it was the people's anger that was channeled into this type of protest. Certainly we had not foreseen it and at that point our things were all planned until mid-April, when we would win and people would go back to class. All hell broke loose after that and we organizers lost control perhaps. And this is a good thing, of course! We have historical examples. There were prior general strikes in Quebec and 2005, the last big one, was our model and we knew what would happen because it's the same government, Charest has been in power for a long time and we know pretty much what to expect. Things did not go according to that in the end, which is good.

NT – Why do you think so many people joined in solidarity with the cause?

LMB - Now with the Occupy movement and other forms of mobilization in North America I think more and more people think there's something at stake, more people feel threatened by the turn our governments are taking towards user-pay systems, less and less public universal fee services. This affects more and more people and so there's been some kind of an awakening. I think the Occupy protests in the US last year were the first mass protest in decades – ones before were on specific issues like women's rights, gay rights, race - but now it concerns everyone.

Joining the students in the many of the subsequent protests were labor groups, opposition party politicians and many other left wing organizations.

NT – Had you been in touch with Labor leaders? When labor and other economic justice groups came on board did you strategize with them or was it more of a sentiment of “come join us in the streets?”

JBW – We never really strategized with them. It was more “join us in the streets.” Of course, we have common demands. We've worked very hard to establish that the tuition hike is the tip of a broader iceberg of cuts to social programs and this is something labor unions are fighting against as well so we already have that common base and it was natural for labor unions in Quebec to show their support very early on. Of course, you have different kinds of unions, different political views expressed within the labor movement and for some of them the idea of a social strike, especially in the leadership, is completely excluded. Labor unions in the 1980s had traded militancy for comfort. It will be clear in the next few months whether we will be able to make a decisive move of more militancy and democratic structures and of more powerful means of action such as a social strike or whether they revert back to the old model of lobbyism and so on.

I have to say we were overwhelmed with support from labor unions, especially outside of Quebec – in English Canada and in the United States. We received a lot of support. Some of them sent buses to demonstrations and we received a lot of donations to fight Bill 78 in the courts and I cannot express how grateful we are for that support. We wouldn't have been able to keep up that struggle for so long without the support of labor unions especially outside of Canada and in the United States. We certainly hope that will translate into stronger bonds in the future between the student movement and the labor movement.

THE ELECTION GAME

Charest called for an election on August 1st and the election is to take place on September 4th. CLASSE and other groups have earmarked a manif on August 22nd as a crucial action during the run up to the election.

NT – And now we're in an election period and the strategy has to change obviously, so where are you now?

JBW – We were hoping to get the strike to continue during the election period but this has not happened in most places. We lost several ballots early this week. It's hardly surprising. It's been six months. People want to go back to class. There's this election looming into view. People feel this will resolve the conflict, they put their trust in the election and we do not necessarily hold that view.

The three main parties that could hope to be elected all hold the same basic view of education in society, which is a neoliberal view. Even the token social democratic party, the Parti Quebecois, certainly puts an economic nationalism before any kind of social vision and if they are elected we would hope that they would keep their promises, which is something that we forced them to hold in declaring a tuition freeze and hopefully holding a summit on education on which we would decide the priorities of our education system. This is what they promised and this is not what they would have promised if there had been no maple spring. A year ago the PQ had an extremely bad education policy. It wanted annexation. The party itself, when it was in power in 1996, declared a tuition hike. They certainly support the commodification of education and, because there was this social movement they now are forced to take another vision for education.

Then again, we do not participate as an organization in the electoral game. We would rather discuss deeper issues and put forward ideas rather than promises, than numbers. We've managed to create this incredibly deep debate which hasn't been held for years around education and we want that debate to be sustained around the election campaign, so far it hasn't so what we'll keep doing is trying to put forward these ideas and obviously it will have an effect on how people vote even though that is not necessarily it's purpose.

LMB – We're calling for the biggest mobilization during an election period in the history of Quebec. And we'll most probably succeed because usually you don't get to see big demonstrations during elections. It's an easy goal.

NT – And where is it going to take place?

LMB – It will start at the Place de Canada, downtown, and from there we don't make it (the route) public. We've never done so, even though Bill 78 requires us to make it public.

NT – So they haven't been able to enforce the bill really?

LMB – Not yet. It's a weapon they keep but they haven't used it yet. I personally am facing \$35,000 fines as an executive from a National Student organization and the organization itself is facing \$125,000 in fines... They could give us such fines. Those are the maximum fines and if you commit the same infraction twice in a row these fines are doubled.

JBW – We hope for it (the August 22nd *manif*) to send a strong signal to governance, to the government in waiting actually, to political parties, that if they continue to enact social measures, if they continue to cut programs, if they continue with this vision of austerity they will have a strong social movement on their hands, they cannot expect the population to back down just because there is an election. This will be an unprecedented mobilization during an election period in Quebec. It shows how strong this movement is and how resolved the Quebec population is in making sure that what they fought for all this time will translate into policy as soon as there's a new government and if not, well you can expect more strikes, you can expect maybe labor strikes... We've been very adamant in creating a public debate on this idea of a social strike and for labor that would mean a general strike if things continue as they are.

NT – On the election, Charest seemed to want to engage in the student issues to take the heat off all the allegations of corruption. But that hasn't seemed to happen...

LMB – It hasn't. But the corruption hasn't really been an issue either. So far the campaign has been very empty.

JBW – Yes. This profound debate that we started off in the spring has not reflected onto the campaign.

A FUTURE FOR THE MOVEMENT

NT – Social movements seem to flare up over a limited amount of time, and hopefully out of those movements concrete organizations grow that can last decades. Do you see that happening here? When you graduate? Where does the movement go from here?

JBW – It's interesting because, as I mentioned earlier, the last huge student mobilization happened in 2005 and those people have graduated between then and now and now they've created grassroots groups. Many of them have become teachers in CEGEPS for instance and within their unions we see them pushing for a democratization of the structures and pushing for support of the student struggle, so these student activists very often become union militants and that continuity is interesting. For our own movement, yes, in the fall we will definitely see a lot of organizational work and a push to affiliate more unions permanently to the more combative side of the Quebec student movement and strengthen that bond of militancy for the next struggle to be more effective. ASSE has existed for about 10 years. (It) started off with 20,000 members.

Now CLASSE has 100,000 members and ASSE (the permanent organization) has 60,000 members. This is very important because as unions affiliate we are able to build a more militant and democratic structure and these structures will be more helpful when the next mobilization comes.

NT – Outside of Montreal, in other areas of Quebec, have you been able to mobilize at all??

JBW – Well we profited from the summer to hold a tour of about 30 cities outside of Montreal, which is important as we haven't been able to reach those cities except for a few strike votes outside of Montreal which had waned after 8 or 9 weeks of strikes, and this proved to be very effective, we never thought there would be as much support outside of Montreal... the population itself proved very receptive and we were touched when we were visiting and had some great conversations. I went to Rouyn-Nouranda. Ludvic went to many cities.

LMB – I went to Saguenay actually. The student population - they have a problem with structures in their universities over there but the people we met were really enthusiastic about the movement and about the possible changes to Quebec society. And in the lower St Laurent, between the south shore and Gaspé, Rimouski and Trois Pistoles and this region, the public support is good as well.

JBW – It's incredible. When I was in Abitibi, 7 or 8 hours north of Montreal, we learned quite a lot of amazing things had happened without us ever knowing about it. We learned that there had been pot and pan protests in little country roads in Abitibi, seven hours north of the epicenter of this movement. It's incredible how far reaching this has been. Mind boggling really. In Chicago a month ago there was a protest in solidarity with us, and some guy was arrested and thrown into jail for two weeks, detained for two weeks, which is longer than any one has been detained here.

LMB – Amazing things, Now we're invited everywhere.

JBW – Yeah, it's the fun part. After all the sleepless nights, now we can talk to girls about how cool we are!

POSTSCRIPT

The manif on Aug 22nd was, by all accounts, a peaceful and noisy march through the streets of Montreal. Organizers tweeted the turnout as close to 100,000. Other estimates were far lower. This was no longer the cauldron of May 22, but rather a reminder to campaigning politician that these issues were not going away. A few days later, just before the election, I spoke to Martine Desjardins, the president of FEUQ, the largest of the student unions about what the results of the election would mean to the student movement.

Martine Desjardins: The night before the election there's a new demonstration and everyone's invited to play some pots and pans in the street – the casserole is coming back! It's just to remind everyone that there is a vote. We want a change in government, but while a new government can certainly change legislation around tuition fees and abolish Bill 78, it's not a government that's going to end the crisis, because the other thing that we're mobilized for, which is more

equity in society, it's not going to end with a new government. So we have to get mobilized for that - not go on strike maybe, but still get mobilized... we're actually putting a lot of pressure on every party because we know they're proposing a lot of new ideas, but at the time they get elected it could all change, so we need to make sure that the pressure is still there to transfer those ideas into actions after the elections.

Quebec went to the polls on September 4th. The PQ won a minority government, with the Liberals forming the opposition and the upstart CAQ and SQ parties trailing far behind. Léo Bureau-Blouin, the former FECQ student leader who joined the PQ and ran for election won his riding and Premier Jean Charest resigned as his party's leader after their defeat and after also failing to hold his own seat in his Sherbrooke riding... "L'ambiance est survoltée ce soir" (the atmosphere is electric tonight) tweeted Ms Desjardin on election night. At the new government's first cabinet meeting on September 18th, the tuition hike was repealed by decree, making good on their campaign promise. It was an emphatic victory for the student protestors.

Since that time, the CLASSE coalition has dissolved but, as promised by Bédard-Wien, ASSE has continued to exert pressure on the government and on November 22nd, six months to the day after the watershed May 22nd manif, the students took to the streets again, this time demanding free education. "We want all public service to be free," Bédard-Wien announced at the demonstration. Victory, it appears, has only given ASSE larger goals to reach for, goals that reach beyond tuition dollar amounts and cut to the core of social services policy and austerity measures that effect a greater constituency than just those paying for post-secondary education. For many in the student movement, the battle may be won but a greater war awaits...