



Lessons from the Quebec Student General Strike

BY LEN WALLACE

My spouse and I sat on the edge of our seats watching the televised images of thousands upon thousands of Quebec students marching through the streets of Montreal carrying banners, beating pots and pans, carrying banners, congregating from neighborhoods supported by the communities. We would have given our eye teeth to be in the midst of these exhilarating mass rallies — a youthful insurgency full of hope and determination when the collective synergistic energy produces moments when “anything is possible”.

The next morning we too cut out square pieces of red cloth, pinning them to our clothes to show our solidarity, angered by the commentary of politicians and media pundits who saw in this movement only a destructive anomaly to the usual “democratic process”.

We watched, frustrated from the vantage point of Windsor, Ontario, described by one of our Canadian Auto Worker friends and activists as “Ground Zero” of the neo-liberal economic onslaught — a community not only under siege, but crumbling with the country’s highest unemployment rate, decimation of the auto industry, thinning private sector union ranks, attacks on the public service unions, attacks on teachers unions, cutbacks of public services, education, health services, falling wage rates and a working class anger often turning divisively inward itself. You can feel the desperation and fear on the streets.

There has been a thrilling and heartening rise of hopes and expectations for the possibilities of mass democratic action and even that

of a radical emancipatory project opened by the general strike of students in Quebec this past year. What is important to understand is that this strike was not a momentary or symbolic event staged for one or even several days, but an energetic, sustained democratic movement over several months challenging the State and delegitimizing its authority. This, despite the misinformation spread by media, has caused excitement amongst activists across Canada and presents a challenge to the organised labour movement and the left. It is incumbent upon us in the rest of Canada to understand what has made this experience unique to Quebec and yet draw from it important lessons in terms of tactics, strategies and vision to apply to our different historical circumstances.

The context of the student strike

The student strike in Quebec has to be placed in the larger global context including the Occupy Wall Street movements in North America and the “Wisconsin Uprising” in which public sector unionists and their allies occupied the state legislature for so long a time. And all these must be linked in spirit to the revolutionary freedom movements which still persist in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Syria. The crises — the problems — are systemic and global. There is finally a growing realization that the crises of a globalized (and thus “total”) capitalism is complete. No person, no political party or group, no government can fix it.

It is disheartening to hear activists in the disassembled left in Canada bemoaning what they too often perceive as the left’s inability to create such a mass movement amongst the working class (in its pluralist, broadest sense) — a working class often condemned as consumerist and lacking class consciousness, that has seemingly bought into and succumbed to the ideology of neoliberalism. That ideological assault has hemmed in public political, economic and cultural discourse over the past thirty years. The material effects are felt in the growing disparities of wealth, centralization of power, control of information, continued destruction of the environment and the rise of a retrogressive conservatism barely answered by liberalism or social democracy. In fact, social democracy has bought into the very discourse, perceiving no solutions beyond some form of market capitalism.

The discourse of public debate has been hemmed in by an ideological framework in which any demands and solutions outside the limits of capitalism are condemned as unrealistically utopian. Too often the left itself has engaged in and been trapped within this constrained framework of neoliberal “reality politics” ending up accepting and speaking the very language of the enemy.

As the economy crumbles it leaves in its wake political cynicism and inaction grown out of fear. Pushed onto the defensive, organised labour has been forced onto a field of battle for which it is unprepared. The vacuum of a left discourse challenging capitalism has been increasingly filled in by the vacuous politics of the retrogressive and reactionary right.

And so, true to form, small “L” liberals, conservatives and social democrats saw in the student strike only a rebellion against tuition fee increases. The media concurred. “What is it that these students want? They have the lowest tuition fees in Canada!”

While the issue sparking this rebellion en masse was that of tuition fees, the Quebec student strike was a multilayered rebellion of young women and men questioning an economically, politically, culturally and spiritually bankrupt and impoverished future. The “reality choice” imposed upon them is a future of systemic unemployment, dead end jobs, being saddled with debts, part-time or contract work, degrees that proved useless for capitalism’s shifting demands, in an educational system production line in which they would be a new working class serving their as functions and functionaries of capitalism.

Lesson One: History

I have often said that the long memory is the most radical in the world ... The long memory; the power of ideas; direct action; building economic democracy where we live and work, because we know if we can't build it there, the biggest ballot box in the world won't give it to us. And we're not going away. Ever.

— **Bruce Utah Phillips**

It is also important for those in the rest of Canada to understand the unique aspects of political culture in Quebec. The student strike in

2012 has to be put in its own national context where there has been a sustained struggle over decades that goes back to the time of challenges to the ultra-conservative Union Nationale regime of Maurice Duplessis era by the liberal striving of a modern Quebecois bourgeoisie and the militancy of a growing industrial working class.

This different ground of struggle in Quebec must be recognized. There, community and culture have been far more integrative and developed than in many other Canadian provinces. Since the so-called “Quiet Revolution” of the 1960s, Quebec developed the ground of a national liberal and social democratic discourse especially with the growth of René Lévesque’s Parti Québécois despite the later right-wing and conservative political shift within the Liberal, PQ and Bloc Québécois parties.

2012 also marks 40 years since Quebec’s 1972 Common Front general strike which federal and provincial government officials saw as a revolutionary threat. Discussions were held amongst workers about socialism and self-management of industry. They took over airports and radio stations. Strike workers were jailed. The young women and men and women in the streets across Quebec are the heirs of the generation engaged in that struggle, the lessons of which were certainly passed down.

We cannot find in the rest of Canada a replication of the 2012 student strike nor of the 1972 General Strike. Occasional one-day mass protests have indeed been held such as the Days of Action across Ontario during the time of the Premier Mike Harris’s Conservative government. One can perhaps point to the massive Solidarity Coalition in British Columbia in 1983. There, avoiding a province-wide general strike, protestors were urged by negotiators to “go home, wait till the next election, and vote for the NDP.” Community activists would describe this as “Operation Sellout”.

Lesson Two: The Community

It’s all well and good to demonstrate against Jean Charest, to demonstrate against the government, but now they are harming Quebecers and the people they are seeking support from.

— **Jean Charest**

The Quebec student strike could only be sustained — as it was — by the support in a broader community. This is a crucial lesson that should be seized upon by any labour organization and every union contemplating action. Too often unions, especially those in the public sector, have been framed by governments (and uncritical supporters in the media), that any strike action or protest is destructive, promotes the interest of one small sector of workers to the disadvantage and expense of “the public” (that the demand for wage increases, preservation of pensions, etc., would be the ruin of business, the frightening off of investment and jobs, increased taxes). Certainly this tactic has been well used by municipal, provincial and federal governments to divide workers from one another.

It is thus imperative for unions to co-ordinate support of the community around them. In the Quebec strike it became apparent that when Premier Jean Charest spoke on behalf of “the people” against “the students” he did not speak with any legitimacy. The democratic voice from the streets was released. The position of public officials was challenged. Students, rather than listen to the dictates of the Premier, waited until they heard from their own elected student leaders.

For engagement to be sustained, labour organisations must be prepared to draw in the entirety of the working class community in a serious way. This was done in Quebec, as was revealed when students in the streets were actively joined by supporters from working class neighborhoods in pots and pans brigades and the growing vocal support of trade union and social activists. This was necessary to fend off the growing vociferous demands of the business community for the provincial government to do all in its power to end the strike. The student strike found deep support in the working class who made it clear that this student strike was in many ways a class strike.

So we must “redefine” the working class in all its plurality. Unions have to develop an open door policy with links to every other organisation of workers in the community: scientists, academics, biologists, environmentalists, gay and lesbian rights groups, organisations of young people in radical organisations, artists, musicians, etc.

And we must be brutally honest with ourselves. As it stands, these individuals and groups are wary of organised labour (because of what they have been told and sometimes based upon their own elitism — even within the academic Left) and the unions have been wary of

outside groups (they are uncontrollable, it takes us outside our own agenda, and they are “smart guys” while we’re only “workers”). Those barriers have to be brought down across every community. Organic links must be established between private sector, public sector unions to scientists, artists, the “intellectual” community and academia.

In 1945, during the historic Windsor Ford autoworkers strike which led to the creation of the Rand Formula, Chrysler workers and GM workers walked out in defence of Ford strikers. The community supported the strike, and transit Windsor union member drove their city buses to the scene of the three-day blockade. Contrast this solidarity with reaction to the 101-day strike by Windsor CUPE municipal workers. Public sector workers were criticized heavily by the workers from private sector unions and the unemployed. The community was divided, often hostile.

A few years ago a delegation of U.S. trade unionists went to South Africa and met with representatives of SACTU (South African Confederation of Trade Unions who were instrumental in the fight against Apartheid). A public sector trade unionists sat down with a SACTU member who asked him “What is your job?” The U.S. union official said “I’m paid to represent my membership”. The SACTU member frowned and replied “Wrong! You are there to represent the working class!” A lesson to learn....

Lesson Three: Reorganising and Organising the Unorganised

Strike campaigns or votes must not be imposed by student federations, or even individual unions. They must be organized by activists on the ground and discussed in regular general assemblies to involve the broader student body. Strategically, organizing strikes first where they’re most likely to succeed...

— Open Letter to the CFS: A Response from Quebec Activists

One cannot assume that the entire mass of Quebec students were political activists. Many of those involved would have described themselves prior to the strike as “non-political” and “non-activist”. Yet the collective experience changed that.

OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES

On average 70% of the Canadian workforce is not organised. The very system prevents it. The Quebec student strike, as a general strike, pointed out the importance of a singularity of interests — students as students. But the Canadian labour movement (aside from representing only 30% of the labour force) is segmented still by type of work. Industrial workers vs public sector workers. Factory workers, service industry, health care, teachers, professors, plumbers, etc. They are not organised as a “class”.

In some ways we are confronting a situation similar to those who advocated industrial unionism against the craft union model back at the turn of the 20th century. At that time if a union local went on strike, it was unsupported by other unions who walked across the picket lines. It was self-defeating.

The original concept of industrial unionism as One Big Union was exemplified by the Industrial Workers of the World ensuring complete co-ordination of effort, the development of a working class interest, and the ability of the unions to support each other and call out members in support of each other. Should we not be considering that again? The formation of a new union and perhaps a new unionism through the combination of the Canadian Auto Workers with the Canadian, Energy and Paperworkers Union provides a hopeful sign in this direction. The new union may provide an opportunity for a restructuring of the labour movement as a whole.

Lesson Four: Sustained Insurgency

Never has the government backed down when it only faced demonstrations, petitions or symbolic actions. It was when the student movement was strongly combative and united in strikes that massive political victories were possible. . . Let's face it: an unlimited general strike is always a risk. That being said, if we are going to make the political choice to fight back, the best strategy we can adopt in order to stop tuition increases is an Unlimited General Strike.

— ***“Why We Should Strike: 23 Answers for Students”,
Free Montreal, 2012***

The strike was not simply a spontaneous protest but a rebellion; not a one-day general strike (of the sort often proclaimed by the labour movement on a weekend), but a growing movement over several months. That meant a commitment from the leaders, organizers and the mass of students, and two years of planning. It also meant that a vision for change was being articulated. This was not a strike developed from top-down executives of organizations, sent down to secondary and tertiary leaderships and — hopefully — translated to the rank and file.

In Quebec the cadres of leadership extended the organization in all directions with democratic input and shared information. The organisations of students spoke with a common voice and were able to articulate their position with a knowledge of both theory and praxis.

Lesson Five: Cultural and Educational Insurgency

A spectre is haunting Europe — the spectre of debt slaves refusing to pay. All the powers within Europe have entered into a holy alliance to regenerate a failing economy, to realise a lethal dream of returning to business as usual, and to level the education and culture, to transform the educational and cultural sectors into a consumer society success story.

— **The Nomadic Hive Manifesto, 2010**

During the strike students were encouraged to exhibit free plays and creative cultural energy and activity. Cultural weapons were intrinsic with students expressing themselves through music, art, poetry, symbolisms, etc. Individuals could use their voices within the collective voice; this in turn spread energy and solidarity. This is far from developed in Canada's labour movement and left politics.

The Quebec student strike shows us the need to develop a free space to develop an independent working class response to the neo-liberal hegemony of ideas. This means the development of a vision that goes beyond capital, that critically responds to the officials of the status quo with an alternative vision the society we want.

Much has been made of the Quebec student movement's use of new technologies (twitter, facebook, etc.) as with other youthful revolutionary movements around the world. But that is only part of the

picture. The media focused on new technologies as methods of organising. They are not methods of organising, they are only tools that can be used for organising. In the Quebec experience, face-to-face organising was crucial.

Post World War II collective bargaining and the dues checkoff system — despite the momentous gains it afforded organised labour through a greater efficiency, centralisation of power, resources, etc. — fundamentally altered the union's face-to-face contact with its membership. No longer did union reps visit each and every worker on the line, or at home, etc, to collect union dues or try and convince members to become members of the union or stay in the union, and as a result face-to-face contact on a daily basis slowly eroded away.

During the attempt to build industrial unionism (against the more conservative craft unions) from 1900 through 1945, labour organisers had to resort to some unique tactics. Communication was key. Unions like the IWW published educational tracts, had their own libraries, and several union newspapers (in different languages) giving the alternative news to workers rather than what they read in the corporate media. In the union halls workers could read, take educational classes, or sit down at the piano. The workers developed their own orchestras, bands, baseball teams, and put on plays, concerts and dances. It was a way of building their own working class culture separate from those of the bosses.

Here in Windsor, when they started organising the UAW in the 1930s (after the unsuccessful runs-in the 1920s), organisers secretly met in the basement of ethnic halls (such as the Ukrainian Labour Temple). The Ford workers were predominantly immigrants settled in the area around the auto plant, and if they were caught by management they would be fired. These halls were the "free safe space" of workers, functioning as a political and cultural hotspot: orchestras, concerts, choirs, youth dance groups, special events, political meetings, participation by men and women and youth, who felt safe, could speak in their own language without being condemned by the Anglo elite, speak a left-wing politics without fear.

This is all part of building our own culture — a working class culture. The movement comes from the ground up and not just the top down. This also demands popular education from the ground upwards making links across the country to all groups so that quick

and co-ordinated responses can be made to the right. Windsor's new Campus Canvas Project which has been initiated to provide popular education within the community, providing links between working people, scientists, artists, community organisations, academics, etc., is one local response that can provide such impetus.

Right-wing think tanks (from both Canada and the U.S.) provide an ideological prop for government and corporate power positions. The left too must develop its response nationally through the interaction of educators, activists of the labour, environmental, feminist, First Nations peoples, scientific community to answer back in our own language.

Lesson Six: Vision Challenging Hegemony

*When I get older I will be stronger
They'll call me freedom
Just like a waving flag
And then it goes back, and then it goes back*

— *K'naan*

One hundred years ago some unions used to have a vision about changing society fundamentally — the proceeds of labour should go to labour, the co-operative commonwealth, control of industry by workers. A hundred years ago committed union activists were not only trying to establish worker associations to seek better wages and working conditions. They spoke of class emancipation.

After World War II, the accommodation and detente was established between labour and capital. The boom of capitalism could provide major sectors of the working class with higher wages, more commodities to buy, some leisure time. By the 1960s people were not even talking about "the working class". Workers had become "consumers".

It is time to once again speak about vision—of a fundamentally different type of society instead of being on the defensive. We cannot simply develop strategies that amount to "please stop hitting us". Today we are being attacked not only on the economic and cultural front, but on all fronts and the rebellion against it (capitalism) also has to be total and not just avoiding the least bad option.

OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES

Surrealist revolutionary Andre Breton passionately wrote that freedom is the only thing left worth fighting for. It appears that the young activists in Quebec have been willing to seize upon the possibilities. Perhaps they are engaging in the first steps of what philosopher Herbert Marcuse called the "Great Refusal". We must demand the freedoms for the new capabilities of society-economic freedom (freedom from the economy, from being controlled by economic forces and relationships of class, wealth and power); political freedom (liberation of individuals from politics over which they have no active control); intellectual freedom (restoration of individual thought manipulated by media control, the abolition of opinion makers and so-called "public opinion").

A number of months ago I spoke with a group of Windsor autoworkers who told me that yes, in comparison to other folks, they get "paid well", but for working as a cog in a machine doing the same mindless task a thousand times a day under constant supervision. They were in agreement: it is mindless work that can rip up your health, make you feel like a mindless zombie and suck the spirit of life from you. Life begins only when they leave the job, but even then everything in their lives becomes dependent upon their paycheque. One worker took the problem even further. "I know that what I do, the product I make, destroys the environment, and I see that it's wrong, but I'm not the one in control and I need to feed my family. So, what can I do?"

That's precisely the problem. Capitalism cannot provide the solution. The vast majority is not in control and have been denied control over their future. Yet, according to the defenders of the status quo, it is precisely the victims of this system who are ultimately blamed for the system's failure. The point is, and what many young men and women have come to see, is that the very power to make that leap to turn the world upside down is in front of our eyes. The majority can collectively say "no more" and this is what the Quebec student protests reminds us. To take a line from the Clifford Odets play "Awake and Sing", these activists have come to the realisation that "life does not have to be written on the back of a dollar bill".

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