

OPEN-ENDED GENERAL STRIKE

SOME ANSWERS FOR STUDENTS

Jean Charest's government has repeatedly said that they are ready to implement 1625\$ tuition increase. Quebec students now have to choose the appropriate (and ultimate) strategy to achieve the goal of stopping the hikes. At this point, the only realistic strategy that could force the government to step back is a Quebec-wide students strike for as long as it takes!

AN OPEN-ENDED GENERAL STRIKE? WHAT IS THAT?

⇒ A student strike is a voluntary and collective cessation of activities (such as going to classes, doing school work) in order to unite and put pressure on the government to back off from the hikes.

⇒ "Open-ended" (also referred to as unlimited) points to a confrontational stance with the government. It does not mean that the strike is limitless, but that its length is undetermined in advance. This means that the strike goes on until demands are met or until students decide to stop the strike.

⇒ As for the word "general," it means that the strike involves a large movement that includes a significant number of student unions in Quebec, giving it strength and credibility.

WHY SHOULD WE GO ON AN OPEN-ENDED GENERAL STRIKE TO FIGHT TUITION INCREASES?

⇒ Such a general strike gives students maximum leverage to make their demands heard.

⇒ It is a way of getting the government to listen to students, while giving students real leverage when it comes to negotiations.

⇒ It is a way for students to gain visibility, both in the media and among the population, to debate and to let their demands be known.

⇒ Students who oppose the tuition increases may have great arguments, but these arguments can't spread and take hold until a substantial movement captures popular attention, which we can achieve with an open-ended general strike.

⇒ Since the students collectively decide not to attend school during a strike, all students can participate in protest actions without facing academic penalties.

⇒ Most importantly, when facing an open-ended general strike, the government is under pressure to resolve the conflict ASAP, because the possibility of canceling a term is unthinkable, economically and logistically, especially because of employee salaries.

⇒ The education system is a crucial part of the economy and it requires human capital in order to survive. It would be impossible to coordinate the institutional congestion generated by a whole class of students that would not graduate. That is why an open-ended general strike is such a powerful, yet peaceful, weapon.

⇒ With an open-ended general strike, students will have the high ground and the government would be forced to react quickly and compromise on the hikes.

MIGHT I LOSE MY SEMESTER IF AN UNLIMITED GENERAL STRIKE IS VOTED?

⇒ A semester has never been cancelled in any of the eight instances of General Student Strikes in Quebec - in other words when the strike was widespread.

⇒ Teachers' unions also cannot accept significant semester extensions for their members, because of collective agreements.

⇒ What is most likely to happen after a strike is a minor term extension or an arrangement on evaluations, negotiated with universities and teachers, rather than a cancellation of the semester.

⇒ For example, in 2005, students who had been on strike for two months saw their semester extended by a maximum of three to four weeks, courses were condensed and evaluations renegotiated.

⇒ On every occasion, the government threatens a term cancellation to force students back into classrooms and minimize the impact of the strike. Yet this threat is actually the greatest strength of the student movement.

CAN'T WE USE ALTERNATIVE MEANS OF ACTIONS, SUCH AS PETITIONS, ARTISTIC ACTIONS, THEMATIC DAYS OR A GENERAL BOYCOTT OF TUITION FEES?

- ⇒ These are all valuable ideas, and much of these means have already been tried since April 2010 when these hikes were first announced.
- ⇒ That being said, all these and other sorts of tactics could come together more easily and more effectively within the context of an open-ended general strike, since the strike will free students from their academic tasks, giving them the time and space to focus on fighting for our right to accessible education.
- ⇒ So in a context where our government has clearly shown its narrow-mindedness, it becomes clear that only a general strike might make it change its mind.
- ⇒ Historically, an open-ended general strike is the only strategy that has led to significant gains for students. _____

WHAT DO STUDENTS DO DURING A GENERAL STRIKE?

- ⇒ Everything they believe that can help to stop the government from raising tuition.
- ⇒ One thing is for sure: the minute a strike starts the arm-wrestling with the government begins. The way the strike proceeds will then determine which of the two camps will compromise first.
- ⇒ Therefore, a strike is the ideal moment to organize large-scale actions to make the government quickly give in.
- ⇒ Our strength is in numbers. The more student unions on strike the more leverage we have.
- ⇒ No one wants the strike to drag out, so the more people who join and participate, the more effective the strike is likely to be. _____

ISN'T AN UNLIMITED GENERAL STRIKE A DISPROPORTIONATE MEANS OF ACTION?

- ⇒ It comes as a last option, when we are sure that the government is unwilling to negotiate and when every other strategy has failed.
- ⇒ In the present situation many strategies have been tried over the last year: petitions, protests, one day strikes, direct action, etc.
- ⇒ In November 2011, we were 30,000 in the streets of Montreal and

yet the Charest government is still moving forward with tuition increases.
⇒ Thus, our most effective bargaining tool and our only chance to get the government to retreat is the unlimited general strike. _____

HAS THE TACTIC OF A GENERAL STRIKE ALREADY PROVEN ITS EFFECTIVENESS?

YES! Here is a brief overview of six out of eight general strikes in Québec.

October 1968: Students' demands were varied, including the right to miss classes in CEGEP, the creation of a public university network (UQ) and the democratization of knowledge. Various of these were accomplished.

Autumn 1974: Two strikes during the same semester: one on new aptitude test for universities and another on financial aid- 40 institutions including universities, CEGEPs and high schools were on strike. Both of them were successful; students' demands were granted.

Autumn 1978: Students asked for a better financial aid system. The movement was so widespread (100,000 students!) that the government accepted the students' demands within a short period of strike.

Winter 1986: General strike to oppose the liberal government's proposal to increase tuition fees and reduce education budget. Within 5-days of strike, the government heeds to students' demands.

Autumn 1996: A three week long general strike not only stopped the government's plans to increase fees by 30% but also implemented a freeze on tuition fees which lasted 11 years!

Winter 2005: The student movement mobilized against cuts to the financial aid system. This strike - the longest - lasted for six weeks in some student associations. In the end, students had a partial victory as the government backed down on its plans to convert \$103 million of bursaries into loans.

⇒ Every time there has been a major setback to accessible education, the strategy of a general strike was potent enough to scare the government into changing its mind. Never has the government backed down when students protested only via demonstrations, petitions or symbolic actions. It was when the student movement was strongly united in strikes that massive political victories were possible!

FOR MORE INFO ON THE HIKE AND THE STRIKE:

WWW.CONCORDIASTUDENTS.CA