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Québec

Why popular movements win: the student movement in Québec

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All the time, everywhere, people resist. Sometimes openly, sometimes secretly. Sometimes locally, sometimes more broadly. As Mao said “Where there is oppression, there is resistance”.

Some popular movements are victorious, while many others lose. As activists we constantly ask the question – what is the difference between the winners and the losers? Of course there are many external factors that such movements face: repression; the capacity of the elites and the State to isolate and insult the movement and to delegitimise resistance; manipulation by global elites who fear that local struggles can set “bad” examples. And there are also internal factors of the movement: its organizational strength, its leadership, its tactical imagination, its sense of timing, its ability to build alliances.

This is the story of the resistance of the “Carrés Rouges” (Red Squares), the Quebec student movement named after the squares of red material they wear as a symbol.

Facing the long march

In the spring of 2012, the Carrés Rouges called a strike in post-secondary institutions. Before the strike, there had been important organisational changes in the student movement. A new organisation (ASSÉ) displaced older student federations by emphasising internal democracy, struggle, popular education and alliances with other popular movements.

In 2010, ASSÉ took a strategic decision. It felt that the government was too entrenched and that other sectors of the popular movements were not ready for battle. By the fall of 2011 however, the situation had changed. The strike was preceded by over 1,000 assemblies and meetings, big and small, in the roughly 70 post-secondary institutions in Québec. Large institutions, like the state-university UQAM (45,000 students), were organized through decentralised assemblies. They emphasised rotation of responsibilities, transparent processes, and the building of a platform that would represent the will of the vast majority of students.

Québec

Québec is the name of a province of Canada and, at the same time, of a distinct nation inside the Canadian state. It has a population of 8 million, out of the 40 million in Canada as a whole. Most are French-speaking and have a distinct cultural identity.

French settlers arrived in Québec in the sixteenth century. It was densely populated by aboriginal people. 200 years later, the French were conquered by the British, who then controlled the whole of North America. The French-Canadians, as they were then called, rebelled many times, including in a major republican movement in 1837.

Later, in the 1960s, a new movement arose, demanding national and social emancipation. It was based in popular movements. A reformist-nationalist party emerged from these movements and won elections in 1976. In 1995, a

national referendum asking the Québécois if they wanted an independent state, ended up in a stalemate.

In the last 15 years, Quebec has been the site of major popular, feminist and internationalist struggles.

For more explanation of Québec and its popular movements, in English, see [here](#).

Waging the battle of ideas

As a left-leaning group, ASSÉ had for a long time proposed that postsecondary education should simply be free (like in many European countries). However, students also knew that in the North American context this would be very tough to achieve. In North America, there is a consensus amongst the elite that students have to “pay their share”, and that society “cannot afford” free education. This consensus even includes centrist political parties, the media and the cultural establishment. These myths are part of a solid hegemonic block. It is not an easy task to shift it.

So at the end of the day students decided to focus on the freezing of fees, and not their abolition pure and simple. They called on progressive think-tanks to produce evidence that lowering fees would actually benefit the whole society in the long run and that it was affordable, with proper fiscal measures in place.

Innovative methods

So the strategy was based on two things:

• A short-term, simple, straightforward demand: freeze fees

• A long term perspective: accessible education for all.

The strike picked up rapidly from February to March, by which time about 50% of the total student population was on strike. Massive picketing prevented classes. Sympathetic lecturers made that easier.

The democracy of the students had a number of important characteristics:

• The strike mandate was renewed every week.

• Negotiations were transparent: there were no secret talks or attempts to find a “compromise” outside of the assemblies.

• Decisions were taken at assemblies by vote, not by vague consensus or consultative process.

• Rather than “leaders”, there were “spokespersons”: there were always two, one male, one female.

The students directly confronted the government. But they also engaged with the population. They managed at least

partly to break down the wall of silence. They did this partly through their own (social) media. But they also used artists, musicians, poets, and actors (some of them well-known) to break into mainstream media.

They were visible because they were wearing the “red square” in public. After a while, almost everyone came to know what these “carrés rouges” meant. By April, it became obvious that the students were winning the “battle of ideas”. This was certainly helped by an external factor, as the government was going through a series of scandals.

The eruption

Normally, in May the winter-tired Québécois masses come out into the street. Cafes are full. The cities are alive well into the night. In this environment, there was a critical mass in favor of the students. People came out in the streets with pots and pans, in support.

Then, the government made a mistake. It passed a new law to force students back into classes. In addition, it imposed restrictions on pickets and demonstrations. Instead of being put down, the movement was inflamed. Many tens of thousands of people came onto the streets, defying the law. Many were arrested, but even the police admitted that they were totally outnumbered. Simultaneous demonstrations took place, Students marching with banners calling for “Stop the fee hike” and “accessible education for all”. with up to 250,000 people in Montreal, a city of three million people.

The student leadership was wise enough to de-emphasise direct confrontation with the police and destruction of public infrastructure which the “Black Blocs” and other anarchist elements were promoting. They thought that these were counter-productive and in fact were often used by under-cover police to delegitimise the movements.

The government was deeply destabilised. It called elections three months later, and lost. The new (centrist) government accepted parts of the student demands. The strike ended, despite the opposition of some ultra-left (mostly anarchist) groups. But, on the whole, society was changed.

Looking back

The key element in this success is the methodology of the students. They combined wide-open participation and free discussion with clear strategies and realistic decision-making processes. The struggle was structured. It was based on established and accepted procedures. It refused to give a big role to individuals, unlike parts of the “Occupy” movement in the United States and Canada in 2010– 2011.

It established a culture of empowering and extending participation. But this did not become an end in itself. It was an organizational tool, to anchor the struggle in the masses. When there had been enough discussion of the different perspectives, the assemblies took binding decisions. These decisions were based on strategies agreed by the majority. The decisions were precise – they made clear the boundaries of actions. Nothing was left vague or open to “interpretation”. And once the majority had decided, the strategy had to be accepted by all. This stood against the anarchist idea of a “diversity of tactics” - the idea that anyone can do anything.

Many activists, especially the youth, had been afraid that their capacities would be stifled, as they are in other large organizations. They had feared being trapped by hierarchy, closed leadership, and centralization. In the end, the

students' methods overcame those genuine fears.

Looking ahead

And now? In the last 10 months, hundreds of thousands of public sector unions have confronted the government. They have used some of the students' methods, although the trade union leadership has been at best slow to change and at worst has obstructed it. There is a huge environmental movement preparing to stop pipelines and other assaults on the natural environment. There are serious attempts to establish organised relationships with movements outside Québec, including the rest of Canada and even the United States. Something is in the air, although as that other Marx, Groucho, would say: "you can predict everything except the future".