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OUR SCHOOLS

The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives

OUR SELVES

THE ROLE OF ART IN
THE MAPLE SPRING

ACTIVISM AND CIVIC
ENGAGEMENT 101

TEACHER'S GUIDE:
AN AGENDA FOR
SOCIAL CHANGE



Ne lâche pas!

**Striking shifts in educational
and community activism**

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ERIKA SHAKER

Ne lâche pas!

Fighting back in the war on progress

This is why radical movements are mercilessly mocked,” tweeted Naomi Klein. “They can win”.

And can they ever.

Let’s not minimize the work — over two years of organizing, trial and error, conversation, communication, and information distribution on the part of the Québec student movement. And this in the face of an often vicious largely Anglo media campaign of disinformation, playing on the entire slate of predictable generational insults.

Entitled. Privileged. Spoiled. Whiny. Had the rhetoric not run so counter to all the inconvenient facts, it might have been funny in its complete disconnect from reality.

Because in spite of claims from the particularly well-heeled that anyone under 40 — with student loans, a shaky job market, questionable retirement, skyrocketing daycare costs, unprecedented levels of household debt, and uncertain mortgages — is drowning in a sea of entitlement-induced youth- and family-friendly policies and funding, reality belies the hologram.

Look at the background. Since 1987, incomes have stagnated for the vast majority of Canadian homes — with two exceptions.

The lowest income earners have actually lost ground while the wealthiest among us have disproportionately benefitted.

Over the past 30 years Canadian households, particularly at the lowest end, have been supplying more weeks of work to the labour market while not sharing in the benefits. The infamous Paul Martin budget in the mid 90s oversaw massive cuts to and restructuring of our social programs, and a major change in the role and size of government. So while from 1975 to 1995 Canada's system of transfer payments was key in reducing inequality, its role has since declined, reinforcing the trend to greater market income inequality.

Household debt has also increased: from 93% in 1990 to a whopping 152% today. Canadians are working harder and longer than ever before, while having less to show for it...except maybe where sheer exhaustion is concerned.

Add to this the ongoing increase in tuition and other fees at a time when a diploma is virtually a job requirement. Over the past 30 years, government grants as a share of university operating revenue fell from 84% to 58%, and the share funded by tuition fees rose from 12% to 35% — three times faster than inflation.

This means today the average student graduates owing \$37k when including private debt, and this doesn't include parents remortgaging their homes to help. Additionally, many students are working their way through university to try and offset expenses.

We know that the effects of student debt are not exactly "character building". Postponement of major life issues such as owning a home or starting a family. Fewer assets. Having to settle for temporary, insecure and often part-time jobs that often become long-term while trying to pay off loans and living in their parent's basement. We also know that more graduates are finding themselves looking for jobs — any job — regardless of how well-suited it is, or whether they have a future in this line of work, or whether they just desperately need the paycheque.

The Census recently indicated that one in four young people are still living at home, which prompted the *National Post* to reach new heights of cleverness: the Boomers vs the Boomerangers. Get it?

But strangely enough, in all the in-depth coverage of this generational trend, while there was some focus on employment, or rent, there was very little discussion that acknowledged the impact of student debt, even though two recent surveys indicated this was the largest source of stress for students — above marks or getting a job.

This is the reality that all the self-righteous huffing and puffing “they already pay the lowest fees in the country” refrain obscured. The protest was not simply about tuition fees. The Québec students were focusing on the results of individualizing the cost of higher education — rising debt.

It’s a little bit nutty, but debt seems virtually absent from the education debates, funding analysis, and the claim that when fees increase it doesn’t reduce affordability. Although it does appear that low-income families are significantly less likely to attend post-secondary education in Canada than their wealthier cohorts. But, maybe they’re just genetically less interested in higher education. Or something.

The thing is, we know the vast benefits of accessible higher education — and not just physical accessibility. Societies that make this a priority tend to be healthier, have a more politically-active citizenry, enjoy greater levels of community and family involvement, and have more social mobility. There are economic returns as well, all of which means that the demand for public education — or public health care, or public child care — is not a request for “free” tuition, or even not wanting to pay one’s “fair share”.

Because of course we pay for our public services. The question is; do we pay up front, with user fees which disadvantage people based on their income and the personal debt that is incurred as a result — something that will only worsen as governments continue to withdraw funding? Or do we pay for them afterwards, in increased levels of income tax which guarantees we pay what we can “afford”, and in the other benefits we all enjoy as a result of living in a highly educated, non-indebted society?

Youth is a life stage characterized by economic dependence, and it can be maintained or changed at the level of both culture and politics. But the collective impact of rising levels of personal debt,

cuts to public services, governments wedded to self-amputation, growing inequality, and a precarious labour market has extended this stage of dependence.

It's a vicious two-step: governments are reinforcing the economic instability that limits authentic choices for youth for longer periods of time, and then media punditry blames youth for not being more economically self-assured and independent.

To comment on or — worse! — act against these political, social and economic structural weaknesses, however, results in widespread accusations of “entitlement.” While the kindest insults might be “naïve” or “idealistic”, generally the language that is slung at young people is venomous, comparing demands for an anti-poverty strategy or accessible education to an apparent obsession with ipods or lattes or designer jeans or sushi. And it's easy to see this as an outright attack on youth.

But I don't think what we're experiencing is so much an attack on *youth* as it is an attack on *progress* (and some days it feels like an attack on the inadequate status quo). Although it is true that, as people of all ages resist the slide into austerity, youth seem to be today's most convenient scapegoats. They also, arguably, have the most to lose simply because they will have to live with the fallout of this attack the longest.

The Québec student strike provides us with a superb case study of how the Charest government labeled student resistance as evidence of an outmoded, entitled ideology, and then used the negative public sentiment towards students that it had helped fuel to distract public attention from the wider debate the students were trying to have on the effects of an austerity agenda and, more immediately, a construction/corruption scandal. In this case, it backfired. Spectacularly. And resulted in a pretty remarkable victory for progressives.

Which does not mean that the struggle is over: the PQ has never committed to a freeze; in fact, Pauline Marois has been very explicit about tying any increases to inflation. But it is nonetheless a very potent example of what organization, research, and a clear message can do, particularly when amplified by brilliant arts and culture, and social media campaigns.

In the interviews I did around the release of our recent report on university tuition fees and affordability, I can't tell you how many times I was asked if this whole "Québec thing" would "spread", sort of like a solidarity virus—or maybe just a millennial flu. Because you know, as one interviewer — and granted it was on talk radio — informed me, the students didn't have any public support.

But this conveniently ignores that even while some particularly vocal people were critical of the *actions* Québec students had taken when they already have "the lowest tuition fees in Canada", the *issues* being raised resonated broadly. Student debt. Precarious employment. Cuts to public services. Growing inequality. The methods might not have caught on — which itself is debatable since the students, red squares and casseroles certainly captured world attention and sparked a number of solidarity rallies — but the content certainly did.

What resonated with mainstream media however, was summed up with that *Macleans* cover photo of the "typical" Québec protestor, complete with hoodie and mask. Cue the tear gas!

The vilification of resistance or of protest is not new. And neither is the language used to describe protestors — particularly ones under 35 — playing on the tendency of older generations to refer to their offspring as "unappreciative" or "lazy".

But here's the difference: this used to be a lame punch line — the "back in my day" Grampa Simpson schtick. Today, however, it passes for rigorous socio-political analysis in the race to dismiss those who draw attention to the implementation of regressive laws and policies at the political level.

The tuition fees we pay; the user fees for formerly public services; the ridiculous cost of child care; the fallout from elimination of programs that serve us all, but particularly the most vulnerable; the growing gap between the rich and the rest of us; the knowledge that we will be working harder, longer, and with less security; and the consistent undermining, particularly for younger workers, of the right to retire with dignity — these things are the price of apathy. And I don't just mean that not enough people are stepping up to fight for progressive changes that are not going to be handed to us (and here we can certainly learn from Québec). I also mean

that governments and other punditry are apathetic and even downright hostile toward the notion of progress generally, and towards the needs of young people specifically.

Youth are not completely off the agenda, of course. We still get occasional news stories profiling “leaders of tomorrow” (notice they’re never leaders of today), or self-declared members of the “silent majority” who are given significant amounts of air time to speak out against students who speak out against the unsustainability of the system.

So the moral of the story is this: good, responsible youth recognize they are only responsible for trying to adapt, pretzel-like, to an increasingly unworkable frame. Apathetic, hostile youth are irresponsible for trying to change the frame so that it actually helps ensure widespread social, political and economic progress, and especially those who come after us.

But here’s the thing: when we vilify people for wanting something better than what they’re told is their lot in life, we condemn us all to a regressive society. We can only make gains when we are prepared to fight for improvements that we may never personally enjoy — but our kids will. Or our grandkids. Or someone else’s kids.

“Least worst” is not the high-water mark we should have to settle for — in university funding, or tuition fees, or debt levels, or treatment of Indigenous peoples and other marginalized communities, or environmental justice, or the goals we set as a society that claims it is committed to justice or fairness or prosperity.

This issue of *Our Schools/Our Selves* is about the links between education and activism, but it focuses extensively on issues raised before, during and since the student strike. Some of the articles were written before the electoral defeat of Charest’s PLQ government, and subsequent legislative moves by the PQ under Pauline Marois to revoke the fee hike and repeal Bill 78. Others look forward to what we can expect from this new minority government, and how future collective actions will help shape and inform the debates about the kind of society in which people wish to live.

The twin histories of education reform and education activism are provided by Robert Green who examines the movement for

accessible education from his perspective as a Québec high school teacher, and Eric Martin who looks at the student-led struggles for education and popular sovereignty in Québec.

In addition to political opposition, the Québec students were confronted with an often vicious media onslaught that painted them as entitled, spoiled and irrational in order to marginalize the struggle and demonize their goals; Dave Bernans tackles this issue of media bias, and Karen Foster looks at the ways in which popular movements are often framed as generational struggles in order to minimize opportunities for (necessary) class analysis.

The strike provided interesting opportunities for unexpected coalition-building that both enhanced the movement while helping to capture the attention and imagination of the public. Blanche Israël looks at the role of art in the Maple Spring, and Ethan Cox examines the popular “Casseroles” movement that built on and extended the message of the strike, broadening and deepening the original action into a full-fledged social movement against Bill 78. And Judy Rebeck looks at the Casseroles movement in the context of the history of political activism in Canada, and the links that exist between provinces, movements, eras and issues.

There is much we can learn from the strike — from its tremendous success, of course, but also the work that was done in the leadup to and the months after the strike vote. Adam Awad of the Canadian Federation of Students looks at the history of student activism in Canada, and how it can learn from the lessons of Québec. Ken Lewenza Jr. examines the tactics employed so successfully by the students, and suggests there are ways that labour can learn from these strategies too.

Larry Kuehn’s Roundup helps put the Québec strike into an international context by demonstrating the range of education-related struggles taking place around the world.

How do we learn about (and from) the history of protest and activism? Robert Huish teaches a course about this very subject at Dalhousie University, and provides an overview of some of the content as well as reaction to the class from administrators, the media, the public, and students. Margaret Anne McHugh reviews *Beautiful Trouble: A toolbox for revolution*, which provides prac-

tical examples, case studies, and tactics for social change from activists and campaigns across North America. And Paul Orłowski has assembled a Teacher's Guide for our calendar *An Agenda for Social Change*, providing a range of opportunities for educators to incorporate key dates in Canadian social justice history into their classrooms. The guide is based on the 2012 calendar, but the range of suggested activities makes it broadly applicable to the current (2013) version now available from the CCPA.

The role of education in promoting broad-based positive social change and empowerment is also examined: Victoria Wills looks at how to make environmental learning a more integral part of the classroom (and out-of-classroom) experience; Matthew Johnson's article examines the relationship between kids, online learning, and surveillance; and Rick Hesch's review of *Indigenous Philosophies and Critical Education: A Reader* echoes the book's call for "strengthening, deepening and broadcasting the synchronicity of critical antiracism and anti-colonial struggle....[to] transform the deadening processes currently implemented in the form of conventional schooling.

Readers will note the greater-than-usual number of photographs in this issue of the magazine — the strike was documented by a number of amateur and professional photographers, several of whom provided us with some of their work. The gorgeous cover illustration was provided by Montreal photographer Philippe Montbazer. An upcoming exhibition of his and Darren' Ell's work is advertised in this issue on page 150). And Nancy Reid did another fantastic job pulling the content together so beautifully.

On a final note: we do not move forward by "making do." We move forward by making our voices heard, making our actions count, and demanding and fighting for a legacy we can be proud to leave — not one we hope the most privileged of us can live with. And this, I think, is the most profound of all the lessons learned from the Québec strike.

ERIKA SHAKER is Executive Editor of *Our Schools/Our Selves*.