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Why Don't American Students Strike?

Zachary A. Bell on August 13, 2012 - 5:14 PM ET

The 2010 British student demonstrations awoke the austerity generation. The 2011 Chilean Winter frightened tight-belted administrators the world-round. And now, Quebec's 2012 Maple Spring is showing neoliberals that if they're going to hike tuition, it'll be over striking student bodies.

As the spirit of youth protest winds westward, one wonders: Why don't American students strike? And more broadly, what can US student activists learn from Montreal about making a movement mass?

As a recent graduate and student organizer, I headed north last month to compare notes with my Canadian counterparts.

Average annual tuition in Quebec stands at \$2,500, dwarfed by America's average tuition of \$12,800 at public institutions and \$32,000 at private ones. The average Quebec student debt is a mere \$13,000 compared with America's \$25,000. And in 2012, 7.2 percent of US college grads were unemployed, beating out Quebec's 6.3 percent.

According to the Associated Press, 53.6 percent of Americans under 26 with a Bachelor's are jobless or underemployed. That's 1.5 million people. That could fill a lot of streets.

So why are they empty?

Some point to uniquely American challenges. Simeon Talley explains in *Campus Progress* that the transformation to a bottom-line society, which is what students are protesting abroad, "has long taken hold in the US," and retro-activism is too damn discouraging. In *The American Prospect*, Courtney Martin points to American class divisions, which make elite do-gooders look to developing countries rather than their own classrooms to score charity points.

Others argue that American student mobilizations do flare up, like Liz Dwyer of *Good* magazine. Dwyer admires UC Berkeley students' protests against tuition increases, but notes that maintaining a movement for months "is unheard of in the 21st century United States."

City University of New York students Biola Jeje and Isabelle Nastasia, who are fighting a five-year \$1,500 tuition bump, argue that a mass movement could be sustained if the right infrastructure were in place. Specifically, if students "establish radical, federated student unions," modeled after Montreal, to replace the "currently weak systems of student participation."

But American students can't just mail-order unions from Quebec. No manual can explain the student union culture that's necessary to make them effective. However, a case study of an Anglophone university in Montreal might help.

"We always say French schools, they are so mobilized. We always look up to them," said Rushdia Mehreen, a master's student in Geography Planning and Environment at the primarily English-speaking Concordia University in Montreal.

Francophone schools have a tradition of activism in Quebec, Mehreen explained, but at Anglophone universities like Concordia, the customs are far less understood and practiced.

Although English activists like Mehreen have been vocal since tuition hikes were announced in April 2010, their schools remained largely quiet. In the winter of 2011, Concordia began taking steps to join its French counterparts.

Mehreen, along with other activists from Free Education Montreal and Concordia Mob Squad, initiated an information campaign, which included the seminal "23 Answers for Students," addressing the history, justifications, and concerns about an unlimited general strike in a step-by-step manner. "We had to cater...to people not coming from Quebec," Mehreen admitted.

They also engaged students through dialogue, hosting town hall meetings for "everyone to argue their point of view," and holding debates to discuss common ideological barriers like, "if you want your education to be of high quality, then you have to pay for it."

The campaign culminated in a massive November 10 march, with two hundred thousand Montreal students striking (including Concordia's graduate and Arts & Sciences students) and thirty thousand stomping in the streets. This served as an ultimatum before an unlimited general strike.

In preparation for a possible strike, Concordia stepped up its cultural makeover through an intensive immersion experience. Francophone and Anglophone universities formally linked up, which was transformative for many English organizers. "They were ten times ahead of us," Mehreen said.

Over the winter holidays, Mehreen co-organized a two-day training camp (a Francophone activist tradition) with this inter-cultural group. Her review: It provided the Anglophone activists in the "A to Z of what we needed to know as mobilizers."

The relationship led to joint actions, including a bilingual demo called "Don't Fuck with Notre [Our] Éducation." Mehreen felt that "these encounters helped us immerse more in the movement because before that it was like Anglophone students were not really taking part in it."

Come springtime at Concordia, "The atmosphere...was totally changed," said Mehreen. The organizing core grew, and many students were asking how to hold General Assemblies in their own departments. "It was contagious, basically."

On March 5, Concordia embarked on its first ever unlimited general strike in several departments. Later that month, Concordia struck university-wide for one week.

The neophyte strikers quickly ran into problems. The inexperienced administrators threatened activists or barred them from campus, and called for all faculty, staff, and students to report anyone participating in strike activities. This led some disgruntled students to break through picket lines, while some departments simply didn't hold a General Assembly to continue the strike.

Still, Mehreen believed that the school gained some activist muscle that's not going to atrophy. "These departmental associations are politicized now." Mehreen's story demonstrates how building infrastructure for each department and faculty to hold assemblies can be instrumental in sustaining a movement.

Concordia's narrative also identifies culture as a crucial complement to infrastructure — it wasn't until the organizing core shared Francophone activist culture that Concordia students used the unions to mobilize en masse and join the movement.

What about Francophone organizing culture sparked the mobilization?

At the demonstrations and assemblies I attended, there was a noticeable lack of infighting. In my experience with American college and Occupy organizing, conflict over issues of process (everyone feeling like their voice is heard) and goals (radical or reformist political visions) are often prevalent.

In searching for an explanation to Montreal's relative harmony and success in building a mass movement, I returned to Mehreen's description of the culture of L'Université du Québec à Montréal, which she tried to emulate: "combative syndicalism...to fight for our rights."

Syndicalism is a principle many of my interviewees repeated. It refers to a sort of union-based collectivism. Academically, it's defined as an alternative to capitalism and state socialism, relying on federations of multiple non-competitive units to manage the economy. In practice in Montreal, it amounted to a strong respect for autonomous decision-making, genuine trust within groups, and an intense sense of solidarity and collective purpose.

Mehreen asserted that this syndicalism was in the DNA of Quebecois organizing. Naturally, it was expressed in the movement's foundational political body: the General Assembly.

The General Assembly at L'Université du Québec à Montréal was rather mundane. A group of biology students wanted an exception to the strike. They would lose a semester's worth of lab work if they didn't complete it by the fall, and only needed two weeks to finish.

A student brought up the implications of making exceptions. Someone raised that summer session wasn't official. Another slipped "if the strike ever ends" into his statement and got laughs. An amendment was offered: the biology students do the lab work over the summer, but don't submit them for grades until later so that their transcript doesn't report classes taken during the strike. The resolution squeaked by with the necessary two-thirds majority. I checked my watch. It'd been forty-five minutes.

Coming from Occupy Philly — which is deciding whether to continue to have General Assemblies at all, and is working on a consensus-based process partially because some consider voting to be violent — the contrast was stark.

Occupy's "step up, step back" anti-oppression policy and radical horizontalism calls for participants to favor underrepresented voices by taking into account how privilege embedded in their identities affects their language, manner, and ideas. The assembly at L'Université du Québec à Montréal, which was governed by

principles similar to Robert's Rules, simply asked that no one speak twice before everyone got a chance to speak once, that speakers alternate in gender, and that nominated facilitators be approved by a vote.

The structure is designed for efficiency and accountability all the way down. Students belong to unions in their faculties and departments, which send delegates to a congress, where any decision made must be ratified by each departmental assembly. Occupy exerts great effort to ensure that all participants feel like their concerns have been heard, while Montrealers focus more on productivity and yet few seem to feel hurt or excluded.

Quebec's particular culture of solidarity, or syndicalism, engenders the trust necessary for a union structure to function well. The culture also fosters a sense of inclusivity and understanding that makes the movement more inviting to all students.

"It's not about tuition for me, and it never was," said Mehreen. Both Mehreen and Noemi Stern, an activist at McGill University in Montreal, have political visions that extend far beyond a tuition freeze. Stern hopes for small, autonomous, democratic communities, while Mehreen wants an end to privatization of public services.

But the *manifestations* (a name for the protests meaning "manifestations in the streets") are not about dismantling the system, and these radical-leaning activists are okay with that. "We went on strike on those demands, so we want a resolution," Mehreen declared. Even if a tuition freeze feels inadequate or social change based in the political system seems reformist, they remain committed to their classmates.

Mehreen personally convinced students that striking works, and that the 75 percent tuition hike was the reason to strike now. Mehreen's sense of obligation and respect for the student union's decisions makes her want to include students with a range of political views, including those counter to her own.

"We just want to go to school," cried Zupa Semitego, a protester without particularly radical aspirations who has been shocked by police repression. She claimed, "[The police] made this into a bigger thing than it is." According to Mehreen, once involved, many like Semitego have become radicalized through the experience of participatory democracy or the sting of pepper spray.

On American campuses, most students are not attracted to activist groups, and some feel alienated or even attacked by them. Is such solidarity even possible in America, particularly with its plurality of identities?

According to Wall Street Occupier David Murphy, it's not. "Shared identity. We don't have that in America," said Murphy, who came to Canada for the protests.

"There are so many different cultures in the US that they fractionalize," Murphy claimed, pointing to splits in Chicago. "Occupy Chicago is now the college students which are mostly white. Occupy El Barrio...is mostly Latin American, and Occupy the Hood...is predominately African American."

I went to Montreal's culturally mixed Côte-des-Neiges for a neighborhood assembly, to see how Quebecois solidarity dealt with diversity. Despite a few instances of interruptions and overbearing speeches, the meeting was marked by smiles and excited conversation. This included an international student's declaration that he identified as "a part of Quebec society until [his] last day in Canada."

Stateside solidarity and student consciousness may be possible, but the activist culture must address the multitude of distinctly American issues.

"You cannot evict an idea whose time has come."

This statement, put out on occupywallst.org after the encampments were shut down, is reiterated in activist circles nation-wide.

But a movement forged in the fire of pre-figurative politics, where the means are the ends, cannot just wield an idea.

An idea can be inhabited by an individual. A culture is inherently based on interactions between people. Culture is not convincing, but demonstrative. A culture is a *manifestation*, a *manifestation*, of a society that encompasses many ideas and principles, best articulated through practice.

John Dewey, the philosopher who pioneered "learning by doing," wrote, "Education is a social process...education is not preparation for life but is life itself." Spreading ideas helps people understand Occupy, but sharing culture helps people become Occupiers. A reorientation toward crafting a culture of accessible activism may allow students to learn by doing.

American students need to create their own organizing culture, perhaps incorporating Quebecois syndicalism but without ignoring the principles of radical horizontalism employed by Occupy to address the uniquely American inequalities engraved into our identities — or else suffer terminal fractures like movements past.

As the Occupy Student Debt Campaign takes off, and college dissidents congregate at the Student Power Convergence in August, let the project be creating an accessible activist culture to support a mass movement.