

Tuition Hikes and Student Strikes

Some Answers for Professors

Tuition Hikes: It Was Never a Question of French

We would like to preface this address with a firm resolve and a clear message: the proposed tuition hikes are not about language rights; they are about accessibility and affordability in higher education. The government's attempt to frame these increases as necessary for the preservation of French language rights is a smokescreen, obscuring their true agenda of austerity measures.

The recent public sector worker strikes highlighted the ongoing attack on public services and social goods by neoliberal policies. Education is a fundamental right that should be accessible to all. These tuition hikes are thinly veiled expenditure cutbacks, further burdening the populace. This assault on education is part of a larger systemic issue that demands collective resistance. Both Anglophone and Francophone student representatives from across Quebec are united against these hikes. The joint statement issued by Francophone CÉGEP and university unions denounces Legault's decision as divisive and prejudiced, stating, "The fear of anglicization serves as a pretext to limit access to education for all university students in Québec." More recently, La CRUES, the spiritual successor to L'ASSÉ (which spearheaded the student movement following the turn of the century), representing 27,000 students across 9 predominantly Francophone CEGEP and university member associations in Quebec, passed a solidarity motion in their congress to stand in support of action being taken against tuition hikes.

In response to these hikes, Concordia and McGill have announced bursary programs to "offset" the increase for incoming out-of-province students, excluding international students. This targeting of international students is xenophobic and creates barriers against migration. Universities must be open to all. The bursary system is flawed, as it is based on grade point averages, excluding many students who will end up paying the increased fees. We reject the false meritocracy embedded in this system. Furthermore, the sustainability of these bursary programs is questionable, as both universities are facing significant financial challenges.

While we appreciate the efforts of Concordia and McGill administrations in challenging these hikes, we believe that grassroots organizing is essential. The administration's actions complement our efforts, but they do not replace them. Our dedication and hard work have

already exerted pressure on the administration, as evidenced by their decision to take legal action. However, legal challenges can be lengthy, and the effects of these hikes are immediate. In light of these oppressive measures, we, the students, announce a resolute stand against them through diversified tactics and direct actions. We urge you, as educators, to stand with us in solidarity. Together, we can protect the accessibility and affordability of higher education for all.

Why Strike as a Tactic?

Unfortunately, resorting to a strike is a result of the lack of serious consideration for other student actions against tuition hikes. While striking classrooms does affect faculty members directly, its primary aim is to pressure the government financially. The collective decision by students to abstain from attending classes during a strike is a strategic move to shield protesters from academic penalties. Strikes serve as a platform for students to assert their demands and exercise their bargaining power. In the case of an open-ended general strike, the government is compelled to swiftly resolve the conflict, as the notion of canceling a term is economically and logistically unfeasible, given the Quebec government subsidies and the university's constraints in managing repeated courses by students.

Planning such a strike is a meticulous process that involves incorporating a diverse range of students and sustaining mobilization efforts through ongoing education and awareness campaigns on campuses. A strike is considered a last resort after exhausting all other avenues, indicating that previous strategies have failed. The only viable strategy at this point that could compel the government to reconsider its position is a Quebec-wide open-ended general strike.

It is crucial to emphasize that students on strike do not intend to target their teachers. Instead, they aim to hold the government accountable and raise awareness to mobilize larger actions. We encourage faculty members to maintain a position of "punching up" by directing their accountability efforts towards the administration when confronted with strikes. Faculty members are encouraged to be active in their union's decision-making processes, as unions are better positioned to act in direct solidarity against tuition increases.

Student strikes are a powerful form of protest, akin to worker strikes, that have been used effectively to challenge tuition hikes and advocate for greater accessibility to education. In Quebec, the student strike has a long history dating back to the 20th century, with notable successes in blocking proposed tuition increases.

One of the earliest recorded student strikes in Quebec was a one-day stoppage in 1958, which aimed to abolish student fees and increase accessibility to higher education. This strike was followed by a three-month sit-in by three students from the University de Montréal. Subsequent strikes, such as the 1968 general strike, demanded the democratization of teaching methods, the creation of a second French-language institution in Montreal, and greater access to education through measures like tuition freezes, loans, and bursaries. The 1968 strike led to the creation of UQÀM, demonstrating the tangible impact of student mobilization.

Over the years, student strikes have proven to be a potent tool for advocacy, as demonstrated by strikes in 1974, 1980, 1983, 1986, 1988, 1990, 1996, 2005, and 2012. The 2012 strike, in particular, drew nearly 300,000 students and sparked widespread popular resistance, ultimately leading to the downfall of the Charest government. These strikes have played a crucial role in maintaining Quebec's status as having the second lowest tuition in Canada. It is important to recognize and uphold this legacy and the sacrifices made by past students. Additionally, we must acknowledge the intrinsic value of our institutions and the collective experiences they afford us, which are at risk of being lost for future generations. Quebec stands as the last bastion against the wholesale privatization and commodification of higher education in Canada, making it imperative to continue the fight for accessible and affordable education.

The current government under the CAQ poses unique challenges for the student movement. Historically, Quebec governments, whether overtly advocating for sovereignty or not, have been most responsive to student demands when faced with strong, united action and a threat to their bottom dollar. The CAQ's approach, however, is different. We believe that Premier Legault would prefer to abandon tuition hikes rather than face questions about the government's potentially divisive tactics. By avoiding a clear stance on separatism, Legault risks alienating both his conservative voter base, whose support is already waning, and the broader Canadian population. This places him in a challenging position, where he must choose between maintaining his integrity with his voter base or remaining committed to the Canadian state project.

It's crucial to understand the distinction between a student strike and a boycott. A boycott, as an example, would involve students ceasing to apply to McGill and seeking education elsewhere, essentially diverting their intellectual effort. In contrast, student strikes are akin to traditional labor strikes, where academic labor is being withheld to pressure for concessions. Student strikes are not aimed at boycotting educational institutions but rather at suspending academic participation and intellectual contribution to obtain concessions from the government, which manages the conditions of education. This distinction highlights the depth

of student strikes, which go beyond mere abstention to actively disrupt the production of an educated workforce.

The Act regarding the accreditation and funding of students' associations (RSQ, c A-3.01) was established after the 1983 student strike and shares similarities with the Labour Code. Section 4 of this law ensures that every student has the right to join the students' association of their choice, participate in its establishment, and engage in its activities and management. Once accredited, a student association becomes the exclusive representative of the students, similar to a recognized union under the Labour Code. Student strikes are thus legal if they respect the statutes and regulations of the student associations that vote them into effect.

Despite the legitimacy of student strikes as a form of protest, some institutions and individuals have sought to undermine them. Allegations that the concept of strike is limited to workers under the Labour Code, attempts to qualify the movement as a boycott, demands for professors to continue classes despite strike votes, and threats of academic reprisals against students are all viewed as political intimidation tactics. Such actions are seen as contrary to the spirit, if not the letter, of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms.

Therefore, we consider student strikes to be integral to the right to freedom of association. Consequently, we believe that any unjustified suppression of the right to strike violates our charters. Additionally, we perceive academic retaliations against students for their participation in a strike as a form of discrimination based on their political beliefs.

As players in this great democracy, we want to emphasize that rights are not solely established by legislation but are upheld through political and social action. To maintain these rights, we must exercise them. With this in mind, we encourage students and faculty alike to uphold the right to strike, as it is fundamental to democracy.

Professor Solidarity, What Does it Look Like?

In response to the current threat to accessible education, students at Concordia University are uniting to safeguard the quality and availability of learning. At the core of our actions are democratic general assemblies, where decisions are made collectively regarding the direction and continuation of strikes. This democratic process ensures that all voices are considered, reflecting our collective will.

As intellectual workers, students are strategically withholding their labor by canceling classes and disrupting the normal flow of university operations. This is a deliberate tactic to exert pressure and assert our bargaining rights. By collectively agreeing not to attend classes during a strike, we protect those who wish to participate in protests from academic repercussions.

This struggle extends beyond the student body; it affects educators as well. The hikes and austerity politics imposed by the government not only limit students' access to education but also have serious implications for the quality of teaching and research. As professors, your work is directly impacted by these policies, and your support and involvement in this movement are crucial. We are not fighting this battle alone; we are in this together, students and educators alike, striving for a common goal: accessible and quality education for all.

Our aim is to build a solidarity movement that unites students against tuition hikes and austerity measures. We seek to express our concerns while minimizing financial and logistical burdens on students, faculty, and staff. We understand the importance of balancing popular support with maintaining a strong stance in our strike efforts. We are also aware of the need to consider intersectional class dynamics when disrupting access to university resources, and we are committed to avoiding any form of lateral violence during our actions.

To ensure the impact of our actions and avoid division among students, we firmly believe that:

- Students or teachers should not cross picket lines in solidarity with their peers and unions. This demonstrates unity and strengthens the message of the strike.
- Zoom lectures or pre-recorded classes should not be conducted during strike action. This can be divisive and punish students who are respecting the strike mandate adopted in General Assemblies.
- There should be no post-strike extracurricular teaching to compensate for missed classes. This maintains the integrity of the strike action and prevents students from being penalized for participating in the strike.

Here are some ways teachers can support striking students:

1. Cancel course material and exclude it from tests/assignments. Only assess material that has been taught.
2. Engage with students about the Quebec Student Movement and why the strike is legitimate.
3. Be available for office hours to offer support and guidance to students.

4. Adjust academic material to focus on topics related to Student Movements, Austerity, Direct Democracy, etc.
5. Advocate for departmental support by encouraging the department to make a statement in support of student mobilization (like the French and Geography departments have already done).
6. Even if you do not personally agree with the strike, organize with colleagues and take other supportive actions!
7. Move assignment due dates away from the strike week or consider canceling assignments altogether.
8. Be as lenient and flexible as possible with students. Recognize the significant sacrifice they are making to fight for accessible public institutions.
9. Wear the red square – which has become synonymous with the students' fight for free education.

It is crucial to note that faculty members are contractually protected from participating in work that is considered unsafe by industry standards, such as crossing a picket line. According to clause 15.18 of the collective agreement, part-time faculty members have the right to refuse work that they believe would endanger their safety or physical well-being, or that of another person. Additionally, clause 48.06 of the collective agreement for full-time faculty specifies that the employer must ensure the occupational health and safety of all members in conformity with all relevant Federal, Provincial, and Municipal legislation. These provisions aim to safeguard faculty members from being compelled to engage in activities that could jeopardize their safety or that of others.

Concordia students and professors have a history of involvement in anti-austerity movements, notably in the 2012 tuition hike protests. Together, we are carrying this legacy forward, striving to maintain or enhance the educational opportunities for future Concordia students. We are steadfast in our refusal to accept a decline in education quality or the reduction of programs due to unjust policies.

Conclusion

In 2012, over 330 professors from CEGEPs and universities across Quebec united in solidarity with the student movement, applying pressure on the government in support of accessible education. This alliance saw professors engaging in various acts of protest, from signing declarations to actively participating in mass mobilizations alongside students. Their actions included creative forms of protest, such as putting Concordia University president

Frederick Lowy's condo "for sale" and issuing public statements condemning university administrations for their responses to student actions.

This alliance of professors and students demonstrated the potential for a powerful coalition that could advocate for educational accessibility and quality. Despite facing disciplinary actions and suspensions, these professors stood firm in their support for the student movement, emphasizing the importance of accessible education and opposing the government's plans to privatize educational funding.

Looking ahead, one can only imagine the impact of a rekindled alliance between professors and students. If such solidarity were to be reignited, it could lead to a formidable force capable of challenging unjust policies and advocating for a more equitable and accessible education system. As we reflect on the events of 2012, we are reminded of the strength that lies in unity and collective action, and the potential for change when we stand together.