



The Brief

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NB can learn from Quebec student strikes

By ELLA HENRY

Quebec has traditionally had the lowest tuition fees in the country and a history of student strikes is, in large part, responsible for those low fees.

Now, I know what you're thinking — how do students go on strike?

Individual students' unions hold general assemblies for all members, call a strike vote, and then if it passes, students don't show up to class, shutting down the university. Instead of going to class, they will set up picket lines, lead demonstrations and do whatever they can to pressure their universities and the government.

In most of Canada, student strikes are unheard of, but around the world, they're a fairly common tactic used by students fighting for an accessible education system.

Shortly after the creation of the CEGEP system in Quebec, students went on strike.

They weren't only pushing for a more affordable education, they were also calling for broader changes to the post-secondary education system. The 1968 student strike in Quebec pushed the government to create the Université du Québec system, and the tuition freeze that remained in place until 1990.

Since then, Quebec students have continued to go on strike whenever there is a threat to accessible, affordable education — in 1974, 1978, 1986, 1988, 1990, 1996 and 2005.

The most recent student strike was the largest in Quebec's history. At the height of the strike in 2005, over 230,000 students in Quebec were on strike. Some of the larger demonstrations during the strike saw close to 100,000 students protesting in Montreal.

In last year's budget, the Quebec government announced its plan to increase tuition fees by 75 per cent over the next few years.

Students in Quebec are fighting back. And if we look at history, they've got a pretty good chance of winning.

In November, over 200,000 students took part in a one-day strike, and tens of thousands of students protested in the streets of Montreal.

Now, over 130,000 students in Quebec are on strike. And the majority are on unlimited general strike, meaning they won't go back to class until the government reverses this decision. The number of students out on strike is growing almost every day.

Student strikes work because you can't teach an empty class. Every time students go on strike in Quebec, the government and university administrations threaten students with the loss of the semester.

But students have never lost a semester due to a strike,



On March 22nd, over 200,000 university and CEGEP students in Quebec marched against the provincial government's proposal to increase university tuition fees by 75% over five years. Over 300,000 students are on unlimited general strike. Photo by Julie Michaud.

and instead the government will often give in to students' demands, and have universities rearrange schedules to ensure everyone finishes the semester.

Why? Because if 250,000 students repeat a semester, that's a lot of spaces not available to incoming students. Imagine hundreds of thousands of parents angry that there's no room for their child to start college or university in the fall.

Students in the rest of Canada could learn a lot from the Quebec student movement.

Students in Quebec are forcing the government to re-think their plan to increase tuition fees by 75 per cent. Student strikes work. History is on the side of students.

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Jobs traditionally held by women still devalued in NB

By CHRIS WALKER

The NB Media Co-op's Chris Walker interviews Vallie Stearn, chair of the New Brunswick Coalition for Pay Equity. The bilingual coalition of concerned women, men, labour unions and community organizations is committed to achieving economic equity between women and men through pay equity legislation.

CW: New Brunswick workers suffer from pay inequity. Can you explain what is pay equity? How is it different than pay parity?

VS: Pay equity refers to equal pay for work of equal value. Historically, certain jobs have been considered primarily female, particularly "pink collar" jobs and those in the "caring" professions, such as those in the health and social service sectors. These positions have been undervalued and underpaid, and the skills, knowledge, and effort required, as well as the working conditions, have long been underestimated. The majority of women still work in these sectors, and this is a major reason why women still make only 70 cents [for every dollar that men make].

Pay parity means equal pay for equal work, and is something that is already guaranteed under the Employment Standards Act. If you are a woman and you know that you are not being paid the same as a man for the same job classification in the same workplace, you can submit a complaint to the Labour and Employment Board to have it corrected.

CW: How can the government rectify the problem of pay inequity?

VS: To ensure pay equity, jobs considered female and those considered male can be evaluated, and points can be assigned to the relative degree of knowledge, skills, and effort involved, as well as the level of difficulty of

working conditions. In this way, apples and oranges can be compared, in order to quantify the pay adjustments needed to bring women's wages in line with men's.

CW: How is your organization attempting to resolve the problem of pay inequity in New Brunswick?

VS: When the NB Coalition for Pay Equity was first formed, there was no legal guarantee for pay equity. Our first success was in 2009, when the NB government enacted the Pay Equity Act for the public sector. Job evaluations in the civil service, education and health sectors, as well as Crown Corporations, are being conducted as we speak, and pay adjustments are supposed to be rolled out this April. This was a fabulous achievement. However, we still need legislation for the private sector, including jobs in the quasi-public sector such as child care, home support, transition houses and community residences or group homes. About two-thirds of New Brunswick women work in the private sector, and are just as deserving of pay equity. Such legislation has been successfully enacted in other provinces, and we deserve no less here in New Brunswick.

CW: In some sectors, such as child care, the provincial government tops up wages. One could criticize this type of policy on the grounds that it represents a government subsidy for business which enables private employers to pay low wages and thereby maximize profits. Would pay equity legislation be any different?

VS: Child care is among the many social and health services that are privatized. In addition to the pressures of wage discrimination on the basis of gender, privatization also acts to drive wages to the ground. Currently, the NB government controls wages for what some call the "quasi-public" sector by controlling the amount of funding available for those services which are privately-owned. This is also true for home care, special care homes, community residences, and many other social service agencies. These services are mandated by the

province and demanded by taxpayers; however private-sector profits are only possible if wages are kept as low as possible. The provincial government collaborates with this situation through privatization. Non-profits fare little better, since wages are based principally on government per-client subsidies.

There are several models of pay equity legislation. Perhaps the best model of... *(continued on page 2)*



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