Rushdie Mehreen and Alex Zawadzki-Turcotte, two representatives from the student coalition, CLASSE, spoke in Fredericton on Sept. 20th. Photo by Charles Lessard for The Brunswickian.

By ADAM MELANSON

Quebec students have a lot to celebrate and New Brunswick students concerned about education and student debt are taking note. The Quebec student group CLASSE recently completed a three-day speaking tour in New Brunswick from September 19th-21st with stops in Moncton, Fredericton and Saint John.

The tour came in the wake of good news for Quebec students: newly elected Premier Pauline Marois of the Parti Quebecois had cancelled the proposed tuition hike and repealed controversial Bill 78, which restricted rights to assembly and freedoms of expression. Marois, who stands for the Coalition Lange de l’Association pour une Solidarite Syndicale (Broad Coalition of the Association for Union Solidarity), is the main group behind the 2012 Quebec student strikes, which will go down in history as the longest and largest student strike ever to occur in North America. Quebec students look to the streets in the hundreds of thousands to oppose a 75 cent per increase in tuition proposed by the recently defeated Charest Liberal government.

The two representatives of CLASSE who spoke in Fredericton were Alex Zawadzki-Turcotte during the fall and winter at 7:15 p.m. at the Metro and Rushdie Mehreen of the Mobilization Committee. They spoke on a variety of topics ranging from the nature of education and the role of CLASSE as a forum for discussion. To help Quebec students are effectively organized to win student demands.

CLASSE is opposed to the commercialization of universities and concerned about the effect this trend is having on the quality and content of a university education. For CLASSE, higher education teaches people the critical skill needed for democracy and how to learn; and is not just a means to pump narrowly skilled workers into the so-called “knowledge economy.”

The CLASSE representatives pointed to the cancellation of the tuition hike as a victory for the student movement and a clear example of the success of the use of student strikes as a tactic. Despite the victory, the members of CLASSE recognize that the New Brunswick government’s possible future plans for tuition increases are a real threat.

The movement creates its organizational structure with much of their success. While in other parts of the world similar movements have tended to be top-down organizations, CLASSE is bottom-up with student departmental organizations governed by elected student representatives at the local level. The ability of CLASSE to effectively engage in direct actions and mobilize for a movement is essential to its success.

Actions and positions taken by CLASSE are always initiated soon and never top-down. “Because of the process, every student has power to impact and debate the positions taken at the national level,” said Mehreen.

The structure of CLASSE has allowed them to credibly pursue what they call “combative syndicalism,” which recognizes the need of “organizing at the grassroots level for sectional and specific demands. During the talks, this approach was credited with ensuring the lowest tuition fees in Canada for Quebec students, coupled with the highest rate of first generation university students, highest number of students from middle income backgrounds, and the highest enrolment of students from middle income backgrounds.

Students have honed their skills at collective demands over the past several years. Successful struggles of previous student strikes have resulted in the lowest tuition in Canada and for the successful fight against cuts to arts and humanities.

The speaking tour from CLASSE comes at a critical time for New Brunswick students. The presidents of New Brunswick universities have recently signed a letter with the provincial government to decide the funding levels of universities, a decision that will impact the next four years. Students, professors, university staff, and students are determined to keep any future tuition increases at the record lowest rate.

Tuition fees rose by $200 at New Brunswick universities last year and by an additional $170 this year. This means that over the past two years, students have paid an extra $570 in tuition fees to fund their degree than those who graduated two years ago.

The Akwaad government and university presidents in New Brunswick universities continue to discuss the future of New Brunswick universities. It is unknown if they will continue and that students can expect similar tuition increases over previous years. The situation is serious.

Kate Price, a Saint Thomas University student with Students for Education and Democracy, who organized the tour, asked “Why is the government forced to negotiate with students in Quebec, but in New Brunswick, the provincial government rarely feels the need to even feign interest in students issues?”

Kate Price also mentioned, “there has been in the first five years not to mention the funding of post-secondary education.”

“Do Quebec students deserve to be called ‘greedy’ and ‘entitled’, as they are often labelled by the reactionary media or of course by the government? asked Micah O’Donnell, a University of New Brunswick student who attended the tour.

“New Brunswick students are taking notice and maybe it is time to attempt something similar here,” added O’Donnell.

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