

WHY SHOULD WE STRIKE?

23

Answers

for students

For more info on the hike and the strike, visit:
www.concordiastudents.ca

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enshrined in the Canadian and Quebec constitutions.

This applies equally to the actions of individual students. Freedom of thought, expression, assembly and association are guaranteed not only by federal and provincial law but also under Concordia's "Code of Rights and Responsibilities" governing disciplinary incidents at the university. It is extremely un-

likely that any student would face legal sanctions for political activity undertaken during a strike. In any event, any student accused of an offense, either by the government or within Concordia's disciplinary code, is entitled to due process. The stronger our collective campaign, the less likely it is that any one individual will be targeted.

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22 «What does this mean for graduate students ? »

THE risks and benefits of an open-ended general strike are very similar for graduate students: the threat of a delayed semester balanced against the strategic power and collective strength of strike action. Of course, graduate students also have unique situations. What does it mean, for example, to be on strike for students who don't have classes? Generally speaking, no matter what your degree program looks like, a strike means the voluntary cessation of all school-related activities—classroom, research, or otherwise. In many universities in Quebec, graduate student associations have successfully participated in strike efforts as part of larger faculty associations. Graduate students have a particularly powerful role to play in a strike, as their research work is central to the university's economic well-being. And while academic life after undergrad can often be solitary, it's important to come together in the face of the current threat to an accessible postsecondary education system!

23 «What are my legal rights in the event of a strike? »

STUDENT unions act as government — and university — sanctioned fee-gathering and representative bodies, mandated to promote and protect the interests of their members. Student strikes fall into a legal grey zone, and are not governed by the strict set of rules and regulations that constrict labour unions. Even so, in recent years the Quebec government and its partners in university administrations have done their best to put up legal barricades to democratically voted strike actions. In 2007, certain administrators threatened to apply provincial Bill 43 (a recently-passed law designed to prevent work disruption among public service employees) to students. This was ultimately unsuccessful (as students are not workers, and thus do not fall under the purview of that law). At the same time, the UQAM administration sought and obtained an injunction preventing students from protesting or pursuing strike-related activities within 100 feet of the university. Yet it's important to note, again, that our student unions/associations are recognized bodies mandated to protect student interests, and that protest activities associated with striking are rights

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1 *What is the Charest government's agenda? »*

IN its last budget, the Quebec government announced its plan to raise tuition: It will soon cost \$3,793 a year for every full-time university student, representing a nearly 75 % increase over five years. If we take into account the previous increases (from 2007-2008 to 2011-2012), tuition will be raised by 2,125\$ (127%) over ten years, increasing from \$1,668 to \$3,793. Since the plan is to index tuition to inflation, increases will continue past 2017, even if student salaries do not match the cost of living. This is tied to a much larger plan to privatize Quebec's public services. Raymond Bachand, the Minister of Finance, has referred to these reforms as a "Cultural Revolution."¹

2 *Why is the government doing this? »*

THIS 'revolution' is taking place in an international economic context that puts austerity measures such as fee increases and privatization at the top of government agendas. In Europe, the United States and Canada, governments are telling their populations that they have no money left because of the 2008 recession. They therefore argue that public services must be privatized and user fees should be implemented in order to avoid bankruptcy. In other words, Western governments claim that collective and accessible public services such as education are too expensive and that we — students and ordinary people — should now bear the costs as individuals.

3 *Does the government really have a choice? »*

JEAN Charest and his ministers want us to believe that privatization and fee increases are as natural as rain falling from the sky. In short, we are being told by politicians that this is not a political question so much as a strictly economic one. This is not true. When we look back at recent history, we quickly realize that this is really a political issue. Over the last ten years, Quebec governments have significantly cut their revenues coming mainly from income taxes. This money was given

significant increases in international and out-of-province fees, the government has used nationality and citizenship as a tool to divide and conquer student resistance. Consequently, the traditional student movement has often overlooked the particular issues faced by international students.

Of course, as individual activists within their respective associations, international students have always been an important part of student mobilizations and the various open-ended general strikes in Quebec's past. But as a constituency, they are increasingly bringing their unique frustrations and energy to the Quebec student movement. For example, in 2010, a campaign led by international students and their allies at Concordia University resulted in "Angry Week." Various creative actions forced the university to negotiate and partially modify their plans to change the way graduate students pay their tuition. Any truly successful student strike needs to involve everyone. International students, with perhaps more to lose than anyone else, should make their opinions heard. From Indonesia to Chile, the move to privatize education is a worldwide trend, and we are stronger when we unite.

International students living in Canada on a student visa might well be concerned about the legality of their status if their union votes to go on strike. Keep in mind that students continue to be registered with the university for the duration of the strike (in other words, students are still paying tuition). Furthermore, non-compliance with the terms of a student visa comes into question only at the time of renewal, and individual students can legitimately argue in the event of a strike that this non-compliance was beyond their individual control. While one might argue that international students would be adversely affected by delays in the semester because they go back home during the summer, in past strikes evaluations have been re-negotiated and in some cases students have been granted allowances to finish their work in their home country so as not to lose their plane ticket home. Again, any possible adverse impacts are precisely the sort of injustices that a general strike is designed to stamp out, and decisive and united action can keep any strike from dragging on indefinitely.

¹<http://www.lesaffaires.com/secteurs-d-activite/gouvernement/budget--raymond-bachand-parle-de-revolution-culturelle/510567>

current minimum salary (\$9.65 an hour), every year. When we consider that a semester is usually extended by no more than a week or two

to compensate for a general strike, chances are that the gamble will be worth it.

20 «What happens if I am on an internship during a strike? »

INTERNSHIPS are not affected by a strike when they take place outside the school's walls (which is usually the case). Indeed, during a strike, courses are canceled only within the institutions on strike. However, all students are invited to join their fellow classmates in protest to show their solidarity with the cause! Similarly, students working on-campus jobs should not be affected. Remember, being on strike does not affect your registration status with the university.

21 «What does this mean for international students? »

INTERNATIONAL students are another key to the Liberal Government's plan for education reform. For the government, international students represent another opportunity to raise revenue and place the burden directly on students. It is yet another regressive measure that will only benefit wealthier students, and harm accessibility.

In recent years, international students have disproportionately felt the impact of tuition deregulation—facing the same hikes as Quebec residents (albeit from a much higher baseline) but also significant

increases in differential fees above and beyond this amount, to the tune of a 35% overall increase in fees since 2005.⁸ Many professional programs have been completely deregulated for international students, including administration, engineering, law, and computer science, meaning that universities can increase their tuition by however much they like at any time for students in these programs (Concordia did so by 50% for JMSB graduate students in 2009.)

Since 1996, when the governing Parti Québécois traded a tuition freeze for Quebec residents for signif-

back mainly to wealthy individuals and corporations in the form of tax cuts and fiscal reforms. Now the government is imposing a tuition increase that will generate a total \$265 million in revenue for universities.² If the government had not made the political decision to weaken our tax

system, we would have all the money we need to publicly finance our public services and keep them accessible. Today, if we collectively decide to protect our tax-based education funding, we could reverse that tendency.

4 «But why would we want education to be funded through taxes instead of user fees? »

USER fees are considered regressive because they ignore people's financial capacities and reproduce social inequalities. Taxes, however, can be proportional to revenues, taking into account people's paying capacities and ensuring wealth redistribution. By switching from a tax-based funding to a fee-based funding of education,

Jean Charest makes it cheaper for rich people to attend universities, while low income people will have to choose between withdrawing from school or being burdened with massive debt. In this commodification of education, students are treated as consumers and not as the citizens of tomorrow's society.

5 «But aren't our universities underfunded? »

ACTUALLY, Quebec's universities already have all the money they need. They disproportionately spend it, however, on private research for corporations instead of on teaching and student resources. Indeed, within the OECD, only the United States and South Korea spend more public funds per

student than Quebec!³ So Quebec has the funds for universities. Public subsidies and contracts for research to universities have more than doubled between 1995-1996 and 2005-2006, passing from \$721 million to \$1,276 billion in 2006 con-

⁸Nadine Atallah and Ariane Campeau, in *The Link*, October 24, 2011, <http://thelinnewspaper.ca/article/2033>

²Institut de recherche et d'informations socio-économiques (IRIS). « Faut-il vraiment augmenter les frais de scolarité », Montréal, 2011, p.3.

³Ministère de l'Éducation, des loisirs et du sport (MELS). « Indicateurs de l'éducation 2010 », p.23-24.

stant dollars.⁴ That means tuition increases are unnecessary, since they are the consequence not of under-

funding, but of mis-spending. The current system prioritizes corporate research over actual teaching.

«But do we have a choice?»

OF course! That's where the political struggle kicks in. Since tuition increase is absolutely unnecessary, we should oppose to it for two reasons:

1- Because it is an unfair measure that will threaten access to education, increase student debt and deteriorate student living conditions.

2- Because education is a right, not a commodity nor a privilege. Since education is a right, it is as unacceptable to pay for it as it would be to pay for the right to vote. We should not accept a society where we cannot guarantee all citizens the respect of their rights, including the right to education.

«What can we do against Charest's Cultural Revolution?»

COLLECTIVELY making the choice to oppose the tuition increases is only a first step. The increase that we are facing right now as students is unprecedented. Not only is this the most significant hike in Quebec's history, but it also follows a worldwide tsunami of austerity measures. Just to name a few, let's remember the pension reforms in France in October 2010 and the massive tuition increase in England in December 2010. In both cases, people responded with enormous demonstrations in the streets. In France, the whole country was on strike for

more than a week, millions of people demonstrated in the streets several times in Paris and general economic blockage took place. Yet, despite the mobilization, both in England and in France, governments adopted these controversial austerity measures. These examples, along with similar situations in Greece, Spain or Portugal, demonstrate how stubborn neoliberal governments can be when it comes to privatizing and imposing multiple new public service fees.

Jean Charest's government has shown many times that it is ready to fiercely defend the 2012 tuition in-

⁴Ministère de l'Éducation, des loisirs et du sport (MELS). « Indicateurs de l'éducation 2009 », p. 50-51.

basis of something called "quorum," the minimum number of members required in an assembly. Quorum is required to legitimately make decisions for all members of a student association. This means that when quorum is reached, the assembly is considered democratically legitimate, capable of making decisions for the association. The quorum consequently

assures a minimum legitimacy for general assemblies, but also implies that a general strike can be voted for everyone on a campus without asking everyone's opinion. This points to the necessity for an inclusive approach in a campaign towards a general strike, in order to ensure maximum participation.

«What do students do during a General Strike?»

IN short, everything they believe that can help to stop the government from raising tuition, within the mandate given by their local general assembly. This is important: during a strike, members of student associations often come together in general assemblies to decide if the strike continues and the direction it should take. So, every step of the way, local associations keep their autonomy to decide what they want to do. One thing is for sure: the minute a

strike starts is the minute when the arm-wrestling begins with the government. The way the strike is led then determines which of the two camps (students or the government) will compromise first. Therefore, a strike is the ideal moment to organize large-scale actions to make the government quickly capitulate. No one wants the strike to drag out, so the more people who join and participate, the more effective the strike is likely to be.

«If my school is on strike, won't I have less time to work during the summertime?»

UNFORTUNATELY, the majority of people concerned with this argument are those for whom tuition fees represent the heaviest burden. A strike is intended to fight for the people who must dedicate all their

free time to their job in order to pay for tuition. A tuition increase will only worsen their situation. The tuition increase that awaits us in 2012 (\$1,625 a year) represents approximately 168 more work hours at the

claiming that such movements are led by frivolous student leaders. But history has shown that when the student movement responds with de-

termination and solidarity, the population and the politicians eventually have to admit the seriousness of its claims, and start paying attention.

10 **«What about the claim that those who want to go on strike are just a minority of lazy students who undermine the efforts of serious students?»**

STUDENTS did not choose to face a tuition increase in 2012. The government decided to impose it. Most students would obviously prefer to calmly stay in classrooms and finish their term on time, rather than spend their energy in a strike. But when faced with a great social challenge, we have to consider putting our studies on hold to participate in shaping our society's future in a more just way. Fighting for accessi-

ble education is a serious matter that will have repercussions for many generations to come. Besides, a strike is no holiday, despite stereotypes to the contrary. Going on strike is about students giving themselves the power to coalesce around a common goal, which takes a lot of time and energy from thousands of people from various personal backgrounds. A minority of students can never create this sort a general movement.

17 **«How do we get to an open-ended general strike?»**

FIRST, this type of strike does not happen overnight. It has to be carefully prepared and a diversity of students has to be incorporated into the process. That is why any strike starts in local general assemblies of student associations that decide whether or not, and under which conditions, they are ready to join a general strike movement.

Second, there must be continuous mobilization and popular education on local campuses, so people stay informed of what is going on in their school and more generally across Quebec.

Third, the strike has to be a last resort, after all other strategies have been exhausted, when everything else has failed. Furthermore, general assemblies function on the

crease. In this context, Quebec students have to choose the appropriate strategy to achieve the goal of stopping tuition increases. And at this

point, the only realistic strategy that could force the government to step back is a Quebec-wide open-ended general strike.

8 **«An open-ended general strike? What is that?»**

A STUDENT strike is a voluntary and collective cessation of activities in order to assert claims that would not be addressed otherwise. The word "open-ended" points to a confrontational stance with the government. It does not mean that the strike is limitless, but that its length is undetermined in advance. This means that the strike goes on until

demands are met or until students decide to stop the strike; generally students meet every day to decide whether they continue to strike or not. As for the word "general", it means that the strike involves a large movement that includes a significant number of student unions in Quebec, giving it strength and credibility.

9 **«Why should we go on an open-ended general strike to fight tuition increases?»**

AN open-ended general strike gives students maximum leverage to make their demands heard. It is a way of getting the government to listen to students, while giving students real leverage when it comes to negotiations. It is a way for students to gain visibility, both in the media and among the population, to debate and to let their demands be known. Students who oppose the tuition increases may have great arguments, but these arguments can't spread and take hold until a substantial movement captures popular attention. Furthermore, the

fact that students collectively decide not to attend school during a strike prevents those who want to participate in protest actions from facing academic penalization. But most importantly, when facing an open-ended general strike, the government is under pressure to quickly solve the conflict, because the possibility of canceling a term is unthinkable, economically and logistically, especially because of employee salaries. The education system is a crucial part of the economy and it requires human capital in order to survive. It would be impossible to coordinate the in-

stitutional congestion generated by a whole cohort of students that would not graduate. That is why an open-

ended general strike is such a powerful weapon.

10 « Might I lose my semester if an open-ended general strike is voted? »

NEVER, has a semester been cancelled in any of the eight instances of general student strikes in Quebec (1968, 1974, 1978, 1986, 1988, 1990, 1996 and 2005) — in other words when the strike was widespread. On every occasion, the government threatens a term cancellation to force students back into classrooms and minimize the impact of the strike. Yet this threat is actually the greatest strength of the student movement. For once, students have the high ground and the government is forced to react quickly and compromise. Teachers' unions also cannot accept significant

semester extensions for their members, because of collective agreements. So what is most likely to happen after a strike is a minor term extension or an arrangement on evaluations, negotiated with universities and teachers, rather than a cancellation of the semester. For example, in 2005, student unions made it clear to the government that if even one school lost its semester, students would return to the picket lines. Students who had been on strike for two months saw their semester extended by a maximum of three to four weeks, courses were condensed and evaluations renegotiated.

11 « Isn't an open-ended general strike a disproportionate means of action? »

IT comes as a last option, when we are sure that the government is unwilling to negotiate and when every other strategy has failed. That is the present situation in relation to the 2012 tuition increase. Indeed, many strategies have been tried over the last year. Below are some of the highlights:

April 1st, 2010: After the first announcement of a tuition increase (along with increases to hydro bill and healthcare), a major demonstration is held in Montreal by the newly formed Coalition Against Fees and Privatization in Public Services. Many student unions par-

14 « Does an open-ended general strike have a chance at succeeding next year (2012)? »

LET'S face it: an open-ended general strike is always a risk. That being said, if we are going to make the political choice to fight back, the best strategy we can adopt in order to stop tuition increases is an open-ended general strike. It will not be easy, but the proposed increase is so high that this tactic is necessary. Let's remember that this is a fight about the society we want now and for generations to come. If these reforms pass because of our refusal

to put our studies on hold, we penalize all students for many generations, including our siblings, kids, and friends. Explaining to future generations of students why we did nothing when we knew the consequences of tuition increases will be more unpleasant than assuming the risks that come along with effective political action, especially considering that we now benefit from the sacrifices of our student predecessors.

15 « If we go on a General Strike, won't we look spoiled and selfish? »

IF we go on a General Strike, we do so only out of necessity. The average student's financial situation is already difficult, and the 2012 tuition increases will only make things worse. In Quebec, 64.1% of post-secondary students had a paid job during the school year in 2007.⁵ These working students dedicated an average of 17.6 hours a week to their job; research shows that working more than 15 hours a week

while studying full time has a deleterious effect on students' grades.⁶ While Charest's government wants to raise Quebec students' tuition to the Canadian average, the Canadian Federation of Students says the average debt for university graduates in the rest of the country is already almost \$27,000⁷ — not a model we want to emulate. Of course, politicians and the media will try to discredit a legitimate student strike by

⁵AIDE FINANCIÈRE AUX ÉTUDES. « Enquête sur les conditions de vie des étudiants de la formation professionnelle, du collégial et de l'université, 2007 », 2009, Québec, p.35.

⁶Ibid., p.38

⁷Gary MASON, « The crushing weight of student debt » in *Globe and Mail*, July 7, 2011, online.

announces a tuition increase, though the pressure to improve the bursaries and loans program (AFE) indirectly contributes to most of students' demands about the loans and bursaries program being realized in 1989.

1990 (February-March): The government increases tuition (from \$500 to \$1200) and allows universities a 10% margin to include ancillary fees. Ten thousand students hit the streets for a province-wide demonstration on February 14th. Yet the student movement is badly organized at this point, still recovering from a defeat two years earlier. Sporadic strikes take hold in a dozen student associations, including universities. The Université du Québec à Rimouski (UQAR) declares an open-ended general strike, becoming the first university association in Quebec history to go on strike for more than a week. Some associations call for a general boycott of tuition (encouraging students not to pay), but only 1% of students answer that call, so this strategy fails.

1996 (October-November): The government plans to increase tuition by 30%. With more than 40 student associations on strike, including 100,000 students at its peak, it is a success: Tuition is frozen and stays frozen until 2007. Yet \$700 million dollars are cut, loans and bursaries become more restrictive, tuition fees increase for non-Quebec

residents, and a tax is imposed on CEGEP students who fail classes.

2005 (February-March): This is the most important general student strike in Quebec history. In 2004, when the government decides to transform \$103 million from loans into bursaries, students start organizing protests and other tactics, and start striking. It lasts 8 weeks and at its peak 230,000 students are on strike. It ends in a partial victory, preventing \$103 million in annual bursaries from being converted into loans starting in 2006 (yet completely losing the \$103 bursary funding for 2004 and partially losing it for 2005). Considering it was the longest and most popular student strike in Quebec history, the provincial student union that negotiated with the government could have asked for more. This time, in 2012, we will.

What we can conclude from this timeline is that every time there has been a major setback to accessible education, the strategy of an open-ended general strike was potent enough to scare the government into changing its mind. Never has the government backed down when it only faced demonstrations, petitions or symbolic actions. It was when the student movement was strongly combative and united in strikes that massive political victories were possible.

participate and *twelve thousand* people take the streets.

September 24, 2010: *Fifty* people from l'Association pour une solidarité syndicale étudiante (ASSÉ), a national student union in Quebec, occupy the Minister of Education's office in Montreal. Line Beauchamp, the Minister of Education, Sports and Leisure herself, is present, and the students ask her directly to stop further tuition increase if the government wants to avoid facing a massive student mobilization. The minister does not respond to student demands.

November 23, 2010: The Coalition Against Fees and Privatization in Public Services organizes a national day of action. Many actions take place across the Province. In Montreal, for example, a thousand demonstrators blockade Hydro-Quebec's headquarters. *Twenty-five thousand* students embark on a *one-to three-day strike* for the occasion.

December 6th, 2010: The Ministry of Education holds a consultation in Quebec with the academic community, but also with corporate leaders (they represent 2/3 of participants). The meeting is not meant to discuss whether or not there will be a tuition increase, but rather the scale of the increase. Therefore, the meeting's main purpose is to legitimize the increase. All national student unions boycott the meeting by refusing to show up or by

leaving it. *Sixty thousand students are on strike* that day and *four thousand* people demonstrate in front of the meeting.

February 14th, 2011: Students vote for a day of strike at Concordia Student Union (CSU) and Graduate Students Association (GSA) of Concordia's general assemblies that same day to protest against the tuition hikes.

March 12, 2011: A huge demonstration organized by the Coalition Against Fees and Privatization in Public Services is held in Montreal. *Twelve thousand* people from around Quebec are present.

March 24, 2011: *80 students* occupy the Minister of Finance's offices in Montreal and demand that funding for education should come from tax revenue and not from tuition hikes.

March 31, 2011: A national demonstration is held in Montreal against tuition increases. *Sixty thousand students are on strike* that day and *four thousand* people *take to the streets*. Thirty people occupy CRÉPUQ (the Conference of Quebec University Principals)'s offices demanding the tuition freeze.

September, 2011: Various demonstrations are held in five different regions of Quebec: Montreal, Sherbrooke, Saguenay-Lac-St-Jean, Abitibi-Témiscamingue and Centre du Québec. Several hundred students join these protests.

November 10th, 2011: More than 200,000 students are on strike (including Art & Science undergraduate Students and Graduate Students in Concordia!) and 30 000 take the streets of Montreal. It is the largest student protest since the 2005 strike (see Question #13).

This timeline clearly shows that many actions have been taken against the government's plan to

12 «Can't we use alternative means of actions, such as petitions, artistic actions, thematic days or a general boycott of tuition fees?»

THESE are all valuable ideas. That being said, all these sorts of tactics could come together more easily and more effectively within the context of an open-ended general strike, since the strike will free students from their academic tasks, giving them the time and space to focus

13 «Has the tactic of a General Strike already proven its effectiveness?»

Yes, on many occasions:

1968 (October): The CEGEPs (junior colleges) have just been founded in Quebec and it's a dynamic period for social movements in Quebec and around the world. More than 4,000 students are refused admission into university in Quebec

raise tuition. The frequency and intensity of these actions will only grow over the next month. Despite this opposition, the Charest government is still moving forward with tuition increases. In this context, our most effective weapon and our only chance to get the government to retreat is the open-ended general strike.

on activism. So in a context where our government has clearly shown its narrow-mindedness, it becomes clear that only a General Strike might make it change its mind. Historically, it's the only strategy that has led to significant gains for students.

due to the lack of space and professors. Students demand accessibility for working class youth and francophones in post-secondary institutions; clarification about the Minister's position on the loans and bursaries program; and more democracy in the university, within a general

critique of global capitalism. Fifteen (out of 23) CEGEPs go on strike for around one month. The strike speeds up the creation of the Quebec university network (UQ) and the construction of UQAM, and achieves the abolition of mandatory class attendance for students enrolled in CEGEP — a first step towards recognizing the right of students to strike by not attending class.

1974 (October & December): There are two general strikes during the same semester, against two different reforms. The first strike in October opposes new aptitude tests for university studies (TAEU) that are required only of francophone students. With CEGEPs on strike for one month, the government cancels the TAEU.

The second strike in December 1974 is sparked after 300 students have to quit CEGEP due to financial difficulties because of changes to the loans and bursaries program. The strike includes 40 institutions on strike during its peak (mostly CEGEPs, but also universities and high schools), for around 2 weeks. Demands include substantial improvements to loans and bursaries, notably abolishing the parental contribution (the expected amount that all parents should pay). This second strike is also quick and effective, resulting in a promise on the part of the government to abolish the parental contribution in loans, and

diminish the parental contribution in the case of bursaries.

1978 (November): With the promises from 1974 not completely fulfilled, students demand free education and substantial reforms to the loans and bursaries program. The strike lasts around three weeks, reaching 100,000 striking students once UQAM joins the ranks of the 33 CEGEPs. The movement grows so quickly that the government makes concessions: Significant improvements are made to the loans and bursaries program.

1986 (October): Responding to the Liberal Government's threat to increase tuition and to make cuts to loans and bursaries and to education budgets, students launch a strike. Thirty student associations (mostly CEGEPs) go on strike. After only 5 days of strike, they force the government to retreat from its plan to increase tuition for both university and CEGEP, to open negotiations about loans and bursaries, and to stop ancillary fees from being imposed at universities in the UQ network.

1988 (October): Disappointed with the stagnated progress of the loans and bursaries negotiations, and fearing upcoming tuition increases, students strike up to 2 weeks, with 25 student associations for the strike (all CEGEPs except two), and 25 against it. Not enough CEGEPs participate: The Liberal government