

## Red Squares and Other Tactics: Revisiting the 2012 Quebec Student Protests

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*In the Spring of 2012, a successful youth-led struggle against the Quebec government's proposed university tuition fee increase became commonly referred to as "Maple Spring." The resulting social movement metamorphosed into a stand against neoliberalism, austerity measures, economic injustice, the criminalization of protest, and the corporatization of the university. Utilizing free-format semi-structured interviews, textual analysis, and rich media archives, this study explores four particular tactics used by the students during the protests, including their use of the symbol of the "red square." The student strike became visible worldwide because of the students' diverse and creative tactics. It was a resistance that captivated the imaginations of many around the world.*

“We didn’t know it was impossible, so we did it.”  
 -unidentified Quebec student, *Roarmag.org*, May 28, 2012

The above epigraph is attributed to an unidentified student who participated in the Quebec student strike of 2012. Also referred to as “le printemps érable” by the French-language media, and “Maple Spring” by their English counterparts, the strike was the students’ response to the proposed university tuition increase by the Jean Charest-led Liberal government. The epigraph’s words underlie a type of naiveté, and, perhaps, even a lack of understanding of the situation. The statement also stakes claim to the fact that the students did indeed “do it”; they willfully organized and took part in what many agree was the largest expression of civil disobedience in Canadian history (Dolphin 2012; Gass 2012; Kanuga 2012). For the approximately 300,000 students that were involved in the protests (“Beyond separatism” 2015), the reasons for the strike quickly escalated from an initial response against the proposed 75 percent tuition fee hike directed towards Quebec residents, to a struggle against neoliberalism, austerity measures, economic injustice, the corporatization of the university, and the criminalization of protesting and basic human rights. But contrary to what the epigraph may suggest, the students who partook in the strike were far from naïve and were most certainly quite savvy when it came to organizing and developing creative protest tactics.

The terms “pressure tactics” and “diversity of tactics” were two terms used often by the student organizers who were interviewed for this study. Tactics are explained as “specific means of implementing strategy and comprise the forms of collective action taken by movement actors” (Meyer & Staggenborg 2008, p. 213). According to Stone (2011, p. 143), tactics are chosen from a “tactical repertoire available to social movement actors.” These tactical repertoires or “toolkits include a range of possibilities that can be chosen by will by political actors” (Swidler 1986). However, as Stone (2011) pointed out, one tactic is not privileged as better than another. Tactics are also defined as “modes of action” and “specific forms of creative action, such as a flash mob or an occupation” (Boyd & Mitchell 2014, p. 4). Influenced by all of the above definitions, in this project, I chose to define the term “tactic” as any and all actions and strategies that were purposefully taken or utilized by the students in attempting to achieve their goals.

Historically, students in Quebec have been involved in their fair share of uprisings. Public displays of civil disobedience in the province are not at all uncommon when it comes to protests against educational fee increases. The students’ demonstrations were effective insofar as the striking students and their supporters were able to disrupt the city at will. For instance, on Tuesday, May 22<sup>nd</sup>, the 100<sup>th</sup> day of the strike, “more than 400,000 filled the streets of Montreal” and the protests “saw a harsh police response with over 500 people arrested in Montreal and another 100 arrested in Quebec City” (“Maple Spring” 2012). As evidenced by the aforementioned event, many lessons can be learned from the students’ actions. This article focuses on four very important categories of tactics that were purposefully used by the students: 1) the symbolic wearing of the red square - “le carré rouge” 2) a unified front: the student groups set aside their differences and organized themselves into a unified lobby; 3) direct democracy and horizontal leadership: the students privileged democratic values and maintained a transparent horizontal leadership structure; 4) diversity and escalation of tactics: the students embraced both escalation of tactics and the use of diversity of tactics as primary tactics. Due to their effectiveness, these four tactics used by the students are worthy of further investigation.

## Research Methods

The goal of the study was to gather qualitative data that provided detailed evidence of a variety of tactics that were used by the students during Maple Spring. I interviewed seven individuals who were all involved in helping to organize the student strike. These interviews were conducted over the phone or through Skype. My goal was to target those students who had either leadership or organizational roles within the movement: they possessed the information and data that I required to fully satisfy my research questions. I was quite fortunate because all seven participants were bilingual. This was beneficial for me as there was no language barrier to overcome, and thus, no need to hire a translator.

I strategically targeted the “public spokespersons” of the movement, those who took up leadership roles and engaged with both the public and the media through their interviews. As spokespersons for their respective groups, they represented important, knowledgeable, and unique voices that I wanted to include in my project. However, out of the five student leaders contacted, only former president of Fédération étudiante collégiale du Québec (FECQ), Leo Bureau-Blouin, agreed to be interviewed. However, one of my pseudonymous informants, Micah Fournier, had taken on a role as a prominent Anglophone spokesperson during the strike. Bureau-Blouin along with the six other student organizers who participated were invaluable to the completion of this project.

## The Tactics Used

### *The Red Square*

The red square, perhaps the most recognizable symbol of the strike was popularized throughout the country as countless students and public supporters donned the symbol to show their support. Thus, the iconic red square became synonymous with the striking students and their supporters. A symbol of solidarity, the red square is said to have originated during the 2005 Quebec student strike (“So, What Does” 2011; McSorley 2012). As per the website Free Education Montreal.org, a grass-roots organization, the red square was derived from “the French saying ‘carrément dans le rouge,’ which means ‘squarely in the red’ or essentially, that students were in debt because of tuition increase and cuts in bursaries” (“So, What Does” 2011). In the same vein, freelance writer Tim McSorley (2012) observed that “carrément dans le rouge,” or “squarely in the red” refers to “the large levels of debt the students are facing.”

The actual red square itself was typically “made out of felt,” but to further reflect the students’ desire to save costs, “the idea is that it can be made out of any spare piece of red clothing or material, so it doesn’t cost anything to get one” (“So, What Does” 2011). Even before the Maple Spring of 2012, Free Education Montreal.org encouraged students to wear the red square by cutting “one out for yourself” and pinning “it to your knapsack with a safety pin” or to “just pick one up at the Graduate Student Association” as a “very easy way to support the struggle against tuition increase” in November of 2011 (“So, What Does” 2011).

Bureau-Blouin explained that the student groups decided to once again utilize the symbol of the red square because of its simplicity. Bureau-Blouin proposed, “So we decided to use the symbol again because it was really simple to reproduce. To manufacture it, all you need is a piece of paper or a fabric and you cut it into a square and a clip and that’s it. So that’s why I think it was a

really powerful symbol. It was easy to reproduce, and anyone at home could do it” (L. Bureau-Blouin, personal communication, January 20, 2014). While Gauthier alluded to its historical importance, Myriam traced the red squares’ roots to even before the previous student movements, to a time where the red square “was a symbol that was linked with poverty” (Myriam, personal communication, February 19, 2014). In addition, all of the interviewees agreed that the red square was already an acknowledged symbol of support for the struggles of the students and protest against the government.

Support for the students was not limited to other students or even just within the province. One could rightfully argue that support for the Quebec student revolt was noticeable both within Canada as well as internationally. For instance, during their live performance on the popular American television show *Saturday Night Live* on May 19, 2012, I watched as Montreal-based band *Arcade Fire* performed the *Rolling Stone*’s hit “The Last Time” with Mick Jagger and with each band member clearly showing their support for the students by wearing the red square. And whether or not it was intentional, Jagger himself (at the very least) symbolically supported the cause by wearing a red shirt underneath his blazer. According to Roberts (2012), noted documentary filmmaker Michael Moore watched the performance and “tweeted about the show, adding that the strike in Quebec was ‘one of the most amazing mass protests of the year.’” And a few days earlier at the Cannes film festival, Quebec filmmaker Xavier Dolan along with his entire cast, which included French actors Nathalie Baye and Melvil Poupaud, were noticeably wearing their red squares on the red carpet (Roberts 2012). During that time, the red square was observed being worn by individuals around the world on a daily basis.

However, not all who chose to wear the red square were praised for their actions, nor were all uses of the red square deemed to be positive. There were also negative attributes associated to the use and impact of the red square. For example, the students themselves chastised the opposition party, the Parti Québécois, for their decision to wear the red square. As Wyatt (2012) observed, many critics resorted to calling PQ leader Pauline Marois an opportunist. And when asked about Marois being an opportunist, Francis Piché, a junior college student was reportedly enthusiastic with his reply: “That’s the right word. It describes very well the attitude of the Parti Québécois and its leader” (Wyatt 2012).

In addition to the problematic appropriation of the red square by politicians, despite their peaceful defiance, it was reported that Quebec students were targeted by police; specifically, those that displayed the red square. In his report in *Huffington Post*, Jonathan Montpetit (2012) warned that the Montreal Police were being accused of “political profiling — of searching and detaining people wearing the red square, the symbol of Quebec’s protest movement.” Montreal police chief Mark Parent disputed the complaints. Another equally problematic use of the red square was one entrepreneur’s decision to file a trademark application for the red square and use it in his new brand of clothing. So although he may have feigned support for the student movement, it became clear that Raymond Drapeau’s polo shirts and tee-shirts sported the red square for one reason alone; to commodify and profit from the symbol (Fenn 2013).

While the two aforementioned examples highlight the negative use and impact of the red square, for the most part, the symbol served its purpose. Not only did it help to bring about local, national and international awareness for the students’ fight, but it also helped to solidify support for their struggle. The red square became synonymous with the uprising. Because of this

relationship, it would become difficult, if not impossible, to imagine one without the other. Undoubtedly, the red square was one of the most effective tactics employed by the Quebec student movement.

### *The United Front*

Despite their historical differences, one of the most effective tactics that the students engaged in was convincing all student associations to join together as a “united front.” This united or “common front” was the brainchild of ASSÉ. ASSÉ had invited all student associations to a *Rassemblement national étudiant* [national student gathering] held in May 2011 at the Université Laval in Quebec City (Katz 2015). As a way to unite all three major student groups and to have all three agree to a “solidarity pact,” ASSÉ proposed an “*entente minimale*” [minimum agreement] “which included the following three deceptively simple yet astute clauses: that all national student associations refuse to negotiate if the government excludes one from the negotiating table; that the national executives commit to not recommending any entente to their members, instead allowing the local assemblies the first and final word; and that all national and local associations refrain from denouncing to the media the actions of other national and local associations” (Katz 2015, p. 69). The agreement between Association pour une solidarité syndicale étudiante (ASSÉ), Fédération Etudiante Universitaire du Québec (FEUQ), and Vureau-Blouin’s organization, FECQ, led to “a shrewd and unwavering grasp of the political necessity of maintaining a united front” as displayed by their respective representatives (Katz 2015, p. 70).

Any and all “significant tensions” that existed between the three groups were never expressed publicly and “ultimately confined to the corridors” (Katz 2015, pp. 69-70): “In spite of plentiful backroom dramas, the events of spring 2012 therefore publicly exhibited a student movement united in common cause for the first time since the schisms of the 1980s. The importance of this triumph for the success of the movement was enormous, as Charest discovered much to his dismay.” No provincial government in the history of Quebec had ever dealt with a committed united student front.

As reported in *Rabble.ca*, this united front was the exact opposite of what had transpired in the previous student strike: “This common front of the student organizations was a major change from the previous student strike, in 2005, when the two more conservative federations had abandoned the CLASSE predecessor, CASSÉE (Coalition de l'Association pour une Solidarité Syndicale Étudiante Élargie), and bargained an agreement with the minister that was subsequently criticized by many students, not just CASSÉE supporters, as grossly inadequate” (Fidler 2012). The united front created by the student groups in 2012 was highly unexpected.

Perhaps because it came as a surprise to many, the unification of the student organizations proved to be an excellent tactic. For despite the government’s many attempts to utilize “divide and conquer techniques,” FECQ, FEUQ, and ASSÉ held steadfast to their agreement. The Liberals could not simply target one of the leadership groups in an attempt to defeat the students. A great example of this occurred during the negotiations with the Liberal government. At one point, the Liberals refused to invite CLASSE to the bargaining table, citing violent actions perpetrated by CLASSE members as the reason for their exclusion. By refusing to meet with the government without CLASSE or ASSÉ present, FEUQ and FECQ further demonstrated how the students were unwavering in their unified stand.

As evidenced by an April 6, 2012 interview on Radio-Canada, Bureau-Blouin is explicit in identifying this newfound and unprecedented cooperation and solidarity between the student groups: “It shows we have a consensus. It’s a first for all three associations, to be at the same table sending the same message. I’m confident we’ll get the Charest government to back down and guarantee us universal, affordable education” (Bertolino et al. 2013). Similarly, when asked about what she felt was important about the strike, Anne-Marie Provost, an organizer for ASSÉ, asserts that the cooperation between the three groups was instrumental in the success of the movement:

The way ASSÉ, FECQ and FEUQ were organizing each together. Because we never saw this before in the history of student movements. FECQ and FEUQ were here since 1992, and ASSÉ has been around since 2001-2002. And these organizations hate each other a lot... The fact that FEUQ wouldn’t negotiate without ASSÉ was a huge game changer in the events because the government was trying to divide. And it didn’t work, mostly because of ASSÉ and FEUQ who wanted to work a little bit together, and FECQ... Yeah, I think that it was a big game changer. (A-M. Provost, personal communication, February 18, 2014)

However, in spite of their unified front against the government, there was always a sense of distrust between the three organizations, most of it stemming from ASSÉ’s camp.

As shown in *Carré Rouge Sur Fond Noir*, a documentary which chronicles the actions of the organizers for ASSÉ prior to, during, and shortly after the strike, there were numerous instances in which ASSÉ members spoke amongst themselves about their fear of FECQ and FEUQ striking a deal with the government without their knowledge (Bertolino et al. 2013). As it turns out, these doubts were unfounded. Both FECQ and FEUQ were equally loyal to the agreement. Their distrust of FECQ and FEUQ appears to be a shared trait by many members of ASSÉ, and one that still exists even months after the strike. Nadia Lafrenière, for one, stresses that the three groups have historically been opponents and continue to be so up to this day. Jolly Roger was succinct in her explanation: “Many associations of the ASSÉ don’t trust FECQ or FEUQ... When you take the point of view from the grassroots from the association, many many people don’t like each other. They don’t like the organization of FECQ and FEUQ because it’s just a hierarchy in the association, they don’t share a lot of information with their members.” (J. Roger, personal communication, February 24, 2014). This distrust was very real because in previous student strikes, the provincial government had been successful in exploiting the differences between the student groups to divide their solidarity (Ayotte-Thompson & Freeman 2012).

To further compound the issue, in addition to the distrust that historically existed between ASSÉ members and their FECQ and FEUQ counterparts, the act of striking was not a unanimous decision amongst all of Quebec’s post-secondary students. Thousands of students who belonged to the three associations actually voted against the strike and wanted to continue with their classes. To claim that all the students were for the strike would be a gross overstatement. And if the strike vote at Collège de Valleyfield was indicative of the results of the other strike votes held at the various institutions, then almost half of the secondary school student population were clearly opposed to going on strike.

The divisiveness of the strike was explicit throughout the province, and “student mobilizations varied across Québec” (Bégin-Caouette & Jones 2014). At McGill University, eight departments voted to strike while six departments at Concordia University similarly voted to strike, but most of the students attending Anglophone institutions, at the time, remained in class (Beaudoin-Laarman 2012; Delancour 2012). As well, more than half of all CEGEPs did not go on strike, and of those that did, the majority were French language CEGEPs that were located in the Greater Montreal area (ASSÉ 2012; Vézina 2012). Perhaps these complications strengthened the movement. Certainly, having the four major student associations that had never before organized together unite against a common cause helped to galvanize the movement while simultaneously buoying the students’ resolve.

Despite ASSÉ’s fears that FECQ and FEUQ could betray them by reaching a deal with the government without their approval, the three groups were able to maintain a united front throughout the duration of the strike. It was because of this united front against the government that despite all the tensions that existed between the student groups, the movement was nevertheless able to “work together and avoid political fragmentation” (Bégin-Caouette & Jones 2014). After all, the creation of a unified front between the student groups, which had never happened before in the long history of Quebec student politics, was, in itself, perhaps the most effective tactic used during the strike.

#### *Direct Democracy and Horizontal Leadership*

Another important tactic that the students used during the strike was direct democracy and horizontal leadership. As much as I was impressed with the unwavering united front that the student organizations had embodied, I was equally impressed with the students’ continuous privileging and maintaining of direct democracy and horizontal leadership. Made popular by the Occupy Movement, this “new type” of political organization is based on “decentralized, horizontal direct democracy” (Kruzynski et al. 2012).

At its basic level, direct democracy and horizontal leadership means that “people who are directly affected by a political issue must be involved in the decision-making process on that issue” (Kruzynski et al. 2012). Further, at the core of this political ideal are two fundamental principles: self-determination and self-organization (Kruzynski et al. 2012). Kruzynski et al. (2012, p. 2) uses CLASSE’s structure to help explain how decentralized, horizontal direct democracy functions:

General assemblies are held in departments, CEGEPS and universities, then delegates participate in weekly spokes-council meetings where they coordinate decisions and actions. There are no representatives, no presidents, no leaders, just people working together and experimenting with new, empowering, horizontal, and equitable relations.

CLASSE, or ASSÉ, prided itself as functioning via direct democracy. “ASSÉ uses a form of direct democracy in which spokespersons (a man and a woman, one coming from the CEGEP sector and the other from the university sector) can only report what has been decided by the congress” (Bégin-Caouette & Jones 2014). As Katz (2015, p. 69) noted, even the united front

agreement between the three student groups was ASSÉ's way of bringing "FEUQ and FECQ closer in line with the more robust democratic practices" of the group.

First and foremost, all major decisions by the organization had to be approved by a majority of its membership. Prior to the actual student strike, members of ASSÉ visited each and every institution where there were members and conducted a strike vote. Apparently, this is markedly different from how FECQ and FEUQ function as "their structure of democracy gives more leeway to presidents" (Bégin-Caouette & Jones, 2014). Myriam, who was a member of ASSÉ, but was also a member of FEUQ because of her university's involvement with the association, claimed that, "FECQ and FEUQ are absolutely not democratic. They don't permit people to organize themselves and they organize the students, and it's not working" (Myriam, personal communication, February 19, 2014). Moreover, she contended that "FEUQ and FECQ are really with the political parties and they represent students and the students don't really have anything to say about it, and ASSÉ is really more like a leftist organization and you have to choose to be part of it" (Myriam, personal communication, February 19, 2014). Unlike FECQ and FEUQ, ASSÉ's desire for horizontal leadership was evident in the way that they conducted their affairs. As an example, general assemblies and votes were continually held in order to deal with major issues. In this way, all of its membership had a voice within the organization and an input into all possible actions or inactions. Arguably, this was an effective tactic utilized by ASSÉ during the course of the student movement, as it allowed its members to take ownership of the movement (Legault 2014).

By promoting a leaderless movement that desired transparency, ASSÉ adopted a fundamental ideology that other recent movements likewise promote. The Occupy movement, for one, insisted on a leaderless movement and consensus decision-making (Boler et al. 2014; Costanza-Chock 2012; Gerbaudo 2012). All of the ASSÉ members that I interviewed fondly referred to themselves as "facilitators" and "organizers" as opposed to "leaders" which further supports the construction of a leaderless organization. Moreover, these general assemblies created spaces where students were able to express themselves freely, which allowed them to openly share ideas, and, as Legault (2014) asserts, "people radicalized themselves through knowledge," providing even more proof of a non-hierarchical leadership structure. However, there are those who are skeptical that a leaderless movement is indeed possible.

In terms of the Quebec student strike, I argue that it was the students' privileging of direct democracy, horizontalism, and autonomy which led to its sustained action. Every night in Montreal, different groups organized to protest in the streets for a strike that lasted nearly half a year. In comparison, the graduate student strike at the University of Toronto, which I partook in, involved a trade union, was completely hierarchical, and only lasted four weeks. Although it was not only because of its organizational structure that the University of Toronto graduate student strike could not sustain itself for a much longer period of time, but the lack of democracy, horizontalism, and autonomy most certainly contributed in ending the strike much quicker than Maple Spring, as many students, frustrated with the strike after four weeks, simply voted for the union and the university to go to binding arbitration in order to resolve the dispute ("Striking University of Toronto" 2012).



Nevertheless, in the case of the Quebec student movement, the promotion of a leaderless movement, horizontal leadership and transparency was a tactic that the students willfully employed. This ideology was, by and large, what led to the creation of CLASSE: “a larger coalition that included all ASSÉ members, plus any association (including FEUQ and FECQ members) that had a mandate from their members for a strike, supported the abolition of tuition fees, and accepted horizontal-decision making” (Bégin-Caouette & Jones 2014). Effectively, CLASSE, which also housed the most militant individuals of all the groups, as it turned out, sought to unite all like-minded students under one unified coalition. The decentralized leaderless direct democracy model adopted by the students empowered them. Having no leaders likewise meant that they were all leaders, as everyone was equal. Countless numbers of students took ownership of the strike as evidenced by the numbers who partook in the nightly marches, the demonstrations, and the protests – all of which were coordinated by many unknown and unheralded individuals.

### *Diversity and Escalation of Tactics*

The third set of tactics that I identified as key to the Quebec student strike of 2012 can be categorized as belonging to either “diversity of tactics” or the “escalation of tactics.” While the groupings are not identical and certainly do not connote the same meaning, they are nevertheless entwined, relational and encompass many (if not all) of the same tactics. For example, a tactic such as economic disruption most certainly fits in with both diversity and escalation of tactics. While economic disruption is one of several different tactics that a group can choose from, it can certainly be argued that it is a form of escalation as it directly targets its opponents by impinging upon their profitability, or in the case of the Liberal government of Quebec in 2012, the loss of revenue felt by numerous businesses and corporations then led to political pressure from these businesses on the government to end the strike. As identified by Katz (2015, p. 68), the diversity of tactics privileged by CLASSE/ASSÉ, “with its roots in the alter-globalization movement, upholds the legitimacy of a wide array of protest actions, which includes both economic disturbances (such as bridge blockades) and direct action (such as occupations of campuses or ministers’ offices).” CLASSE/ASSÉ despite being adamantly against violence that was “perpetrated against individuals,” were much more accepting of acts of vandalism, and “generally refrain from condemning such actions that, for example, target the property of multinational banks and corporations” (Katz 2015, p. 68).

The diversification of tactics reinforces the idea put forth by Legault (2014) that “people are not told what to do as long as the common goal remains in place.” On a slightly different note, diversity of tactics is explained as considering “a rainbow of possibilities when it comes time to take action” (Kruzynski et al. 2012). Kruzynski et al. (2012, p. 14) continue:

This principle does not rest on the idea that anything goes in any given situation, but implies that the debate about the legitimacy of various tactics must occur within the movement, and should be decided for each situation by the people taking action themselves. Certainly the media should not make this decision for us. Indeed, we have all witnessed on many occasions how the mainstream media, along with State politicians, tend to create an image of the “good” versus the “bad” protestor in an effort to divide and conquer. This strategy has been used again against the current student strike activists. However, for the first time,

movement “leaders” – or spokespeople – for the most part, have not denounced tactics such as economic disruption, contributing to the maintenance of a certain unity and a strong sense of solidarity within the movement.

For Kruzynski and others, a diversity of tactics is a legitimate tactic to be used by a movement as it deems necessary. As opposed to the State or corporate-owned media dictating which tactics are acceptable, Kruzynski et al. (2012) posit that a strong sense of solidarity remained with the movement because more “radical tactics” were not denounced by the movement leaders or spokespeople.

Previously, supporting a diversity of tactics had included “solidarity with the full range of resistance” and it presupposed that “no tactics are ruled out in advance and activists refrain from publicly criticizing tactics with which they disagree” (Conway 2003, p. 507). Conway (2003, p. 511) argued that a respect for diversity of tactics must include “a tolerance of pluralism” which means respect and acceptance of the tactical choices other activists have made, which could include such actions as “rock throwing, window-breaking, garbage can burning, and vandalism.” Respect for diversity of tactics is then a tactic on its own that promotes solidarity. Because most proponents are implicitly or explicitly non-violent, respect for diversity of tactics does not mean engaging in or even agreeing with another’s tactic, but instead, it does mean that everyone has “the right and responsibility to identify their own thresholds of legitimate protest and make their own political, strategical, and ethical choices, while also allowing others to do so free from public criticism or censure” (Conway 2003, p. 511). In short, respect for diversity of tactics allowed members to partake in more radical activities (i.e. violent actions, Black Bloc actions, etc.) without reprisal and rejection from the other members.

One tactic employed by the students that could be considered as belonging to both diversity of tactics and escalation of tactics is economic disruption. A purposeful action that targeted profitability, economic disruption was strategically and effectively utilized by the students. Fournier explained:

Why the strike was powerful was because it created enormous political and economic pressure. When you shut down every day that students were not at school because of the strike, the university has to open one day longer. So that means that when all this is eventually over, they're going to have to pay professors extra to stay longer, services to stay longer . . . it's billions and billions of dollars . . . and the demonstrations in the subway . . . you're affecting the tourist revenue, you're shutting down major arteries, you're destabilizing traffic. The idea was that peaceful protest, even in that context, was highly economically disruptive. And at some point, business leaders started calling and putting huge amounts of pressure on the government to do something because they were losing money. (M. Fournier, personal communication, January 31, 2014)

Like Fournier, many of the students believed that the government was motivated to do something due to the complaints from corporations and businesses that suffered economic pressure from the students’ actions.

Numerous businesses were negatively affected by the many demonstrations that occurred in Montreal. Business owners lost revenue because of the strike during the spring, but many feared

even greater losses as the strike slowly moved into the summertime – festival season in the city. According to a CBC News report dated June 5, 2012, hotel room rentals decreased by 10.7 percent in May of 2012, and were expected to drop a further 10 to 12 percent in June (The Canadian Press 2012). The hotel industry was reflective of the entire city’s tourism as the industry “[was] feeling the effects of the student demonstrations, which march through the downtown core and adjoining areas” (The Canadian Press 2012). At the time, the Montreal International Jazz Festival, The (Montreal) Grand Prix, and the Just For Laughs comedy festival were listed among the businesses fearful of a loss in revenue. Gilbert Rozon, the President of Just for Laughs, even held a meeting with the student leaders in an attempt to get assurances that his festival would not be targeted by student demonstrators (The Canadian Press 2012). Not surprisingly, the student leaders shrugged off the negative press as being “wildly overblown as part of a general effort to discredit the movement” (The Canadian Press 2012).

Another example of economic disruption took place on March 6, 2012 as “about a hundred students entered the Loto-Quebec building in downtown Montreal, blocking access to the elevators. The march started in Victoria Square at midday and ended with anti-riot police and tear gas” (Kelly 2012). A brainchild by members of ASSÉ, the students not only attempted to negatively affect the Loto-Québec corporation economically by disrupting their day-to-day operations, but also hoped to elicit media coverage for the strike by creating a spectacle in an attempt to gain additional support for their cause from other students and the public alike. But instead of succumbing to economic and political pressures and revoking the proposed tuition fee strike, the Charest-led Liberals instead responded by creating and implementing the highly unpopular Bill 78 (Sterne 2012).

Like many others, Myriam believed that because the students did not require “anyone to give them permission,” due to the movement’s democratic ideals and horizontal leadership, it allowed them to explore and carry out a multitude of varying tactics – a diversity of tactics – which everyone in the movement privileged (Myriam, personal communication, February 19, 2014). Myriam also credits the diversity of tactics for helping to maintain the length of the strike:

People organized things with their friends by themselves and that’s why the movement was so strong. Because for example, the nude manifestation, I never went...it wasn’t my kind of tactic, but that’s OK...it just sprouted out, like mushrooms, it was everywhere, every time...there were three manifestations by day...there were people everywhere in city, in the province, and people just organized themselves alone. There were new events and everything. They didn’t need...I think what was important is the organization...why stop the debates...thinking about strategy and those kinds of things...but for tactics, for what was going on in the streets and in the conferences and the arts, people just did it. (Myriam, personal communication, February 19, 2014)

However, those engaged in diverse tactics were not exempt from criticism, even from some of their peers as well as others engaged in the movement. In other words, not all of those involved in the movement were in favour of some of the tactics used – although most did adhere to respecting the diversity of tactics.

In a brief conversation with Legault shortly after his talk, he commented that Bureau-Blouin and the members of FECQ denounced many of the tactics that ASSÉ had proposed to use as they were deemed “too radical” (G. Legault, personal communication, June 21, 2014). Certainly, this left Legault and many of the ASSÉ members frustrated. Much like Bureau-Blouin, however, Fournier also believed that many of the tactics used were quite detrimental to the movement. Fournier posits:

There were pressure tactics on the ground that kept this debate going but from my perspective, you can have a group of people wearing masks and setting off smoke bombs and shutting down buildings...and as an activist, I understand the principle of diversity of tactics...but as a strategist, in that moment, I felt that those tactics were not strategic. And there was this sort of tension on the left...there was this non-denunciation issue of violence and its role. (M. Fournier, personal communication, January 31, 2014)

As an executive member of a Montréal university’s undergraduate student union at the time of the strike, Fournier was placed in an unenviable and very compromising position by the actions of some of the students who engaged in a variety of tactics:

These people could go . . . and I’m talking a group of 10 to 15 . . . a lot of who were close friends . . . we just ended up in different parts of the movement. You can go shut down a building, but you don’t have to answer for that action! The media is going to call the elected executives and other representatives. You don’t send out a press release, you can’t have a spokesperson after that kind of action . . . so when something like that happens [on campus], the person that has to respond on behalf of those actions wasn’t involved in planning them, doesn’t have the information. And I’m in a tricky position because I can’t denounce what these people, who I know, who were running around, were doing. Right? But I can’t also really defend it, because it’s actually not helping. It’s not winning any points in the media, it’s not making the business students likely vote for a strike next time . . . (M. Fournier, personal communication, January 31, 2014)

As Fournier postulated, there was a sense of “ideological admiration” for the students at UQAM who used a variety of tactics such as blocking and preventing access to their university:

So there was an ideological admiration for this tactic, they wanted to be doing what the people at UQAM were doing . . . and no one does what the people at UQAM were doing...but even the people at UQAM have a huge amount of blowback, they just don’t give a shit. Which is cool for them. That is their organizational culture. But on most campuses, the culture is not as militant, and some of this stuff was so new that you had students standing outside of a room saying, “We’re not going into this classroom.” And that’s like the first time it ever happened. It was revolutionary in this moment and certainly I think that it was really transformative. (M. Fournier, personal communication, January 31, 2014)

Despite objections to some of the actions undertaken by some students, the prevailing consensus from most of the other students was that of admiration for the diversity of tactics that others were

engaging in. As recounted by Fournier, students from less militant campuses who were new to activism were encouraged and even emboldened by the more radical actions that were enacted by the UQAM students. And, as Sterne (2012, p. 2) reminded us, “as the student movement has already demonstrated, the protest cultures here are extremely vital.”

Yet, the promotion of diversity of tactics was not without their own set of problems. Since the students had the ability to do what they wanted without repercussion from the student leaders, some turned to violence as a tactic. Consequently, ASSÉ (or CLASSE) was often blamed for the “Black Bloc” tactics used by some of the students. Very briefly, the Black Bloc is said to have made itself known on November 30, 1999 during the Movement for Global Justice in Seattle when members “smashed” the windows of businesses including McDonald’s, Nike, Gap, and a few banks (Dupuis-Déri 2010). Dupuis-Déri (2010, p. 46) posited that the Black Bloc is “an easily identifiable collective action carried out by individuals wearing black clothes and masks and forming a contingent – a black block – within a rally.” The Black Bloc represented “the renewal of anarchism on the political scene in general and among anticapitalist forces in particular,” can vary in number depending on the event, and its primary objective is to “signal the presence within a demonstration of a radical critique of the economic and political system” (Dupuis-Déri 2010, p. 46). Further, Dupuis-Déri (2010, p. 46) claimed that “there is no such thing as *the* Black Bloc; there are, rather, Black Blocs, each of them arising on the occasion of a rally and dissolving when the rally is over.” Paris (2003, p. 321) further explained the Black Bloc as “a tactic open to anyone who seeks to escalate the social and economic costs of repressive governmental activity.” In Brazil, Mattos (2014, p. 73) described the Black Bloc not as an organized group but one that “instead represent a tactic in confrontations with the police.” Since its formation, the Black Bloc has appeared in many worldwide uprisings (Dupuis-Déri 2010; Paris 2003). From Quebec, to Brazil, to Genoa, to Spain, to Egypt, to San Francisco, the Black Bloc has participated in demonstrations worldwide. As mentioned previously, to be a Black Bloc, effectively, is to partake in a particular tactic.

Victoria, a student at Cégep du Vieux Montréal, explained Black Bloc tactics as targeted violence against capitalist forms and those that support it, including banks, large conglomerates and their retail outlets, and the police (Bertolino et al. 2013). A report by Zoran Bozicevic, which appeared in the *National Post* on May 2, 2012, is indicative of the type of press the English-language corporate-owned media reported about the Black Bloc. Bozicevic’s (2012) headline read, “Montreal May Day anti-capitalist march sees protesters use Black Bloc anarchist tactics.” The article was complete with photographs of violent acts committed by both students and the police. In addition to detailing the confrontations between students and the police, the article also included the following narrative:

A May Day protest in downtown Montreal on Tuesday, led by the anti-capitalist group CLAC Montreal, quickly dissolved into a violent fracas that saw 108 people arrested and 33 charged. The march began at 5:30 p.m. but was declared illegal within 30 minutes, as protesters covering their faces with black and red bandanas threw bottles at police officers, smashed windows and dangled donuts in front of officers on fishing rods, said Const. Daniel Fortier, spokesman for the Montreal Police Service. Some wore red squares pinned to their clothing, a sign of support for tuition freezes in Quebec. (Bozicevic 2012)

Due to this incident and other similar actions, the Liberal government demanded that ASSÉ denounce the violent actions and barred them from the negotiating table. As was shown in *Carré Rouge Sur Fond Noir*, this demand was a ploy by the government to place ASSÉ in a highly problematic position (Bertolino et al. 2013). On the one hand, the promotion of diversity of tactics without any sort of supervision was a fundamental principle for ASSÉ. On the other, the government demanded them to denounce the violence before allowing the group to the bargaining table. What occurred instead was ASSÉ formally denouncing violence that was perpetrated against innocent civilians only, through Nadeau-Dubois' announcement to the press, and FEUQ and FECQ's steadfast refusal to negotiate with the government without ASSÉ joining them at the bargaining table (Bertolino et al. 2013).

The escalation of tactics, the other grouping of tactics presented in this section of the study, promoted the idea of continually increasing pressure on the opponent until victory was achieved. Concurrent with and alongside the diversity of tactics that they used, the Quebec students also engaged in "pressure escalation." This particular tactic, which was also referred to as "escalating tactics" or "escalation of tactics" implied a "progression" in the type of tactics that were utilized. Legault (2014) explained how ASSÉ approached this particular tactic: "In the quest for a balance of power against an opponent, you try to win. Pressure escalation is a way to achieve goals, as you are able to build short-term struggles, and you can build a solid base based on solidarity... We just kept on doing mobilization, kept on talking to people, and building a grassroots movement. By going slowly, you get more people to join in." For example, in the early days of mobilization, organizers approached students with petitions in order to gauge their attitudes about a possible student strike. Moreover, these petitions allowed the organizers to also inform those interested students about the issues at hand. Although most of the organizers did not believe in the effectiveness of petitions, they nevertheless utilized this tactic initially: "Although petitions are fairly useless, since governments don't listen to them, it is a way to help mobilize individuals, to get them to participate" (Legault 2014). As Katz (2015, p. 73) recalled, "Petitions were used primarily as a mobilization and outreach tool by the CLASSE to build a preliminary database of supporters; only once significant numbers adhered to a petition could the true organizational work commence, and the CLASSE took pains to ensure that no step was initiated before students exhibited a readiness to proceed." The organizers of the movement used the petitions as one of the first tactics, eventually moving forward and "escalating" to using other tactics such as "symbolic actions, then small-scale demonstrations, and then escalates to include limited strikes, direct action and economic disturbances" (Katz 2015, pp. 73-74).

When asked about petitions, and online petitions in particular, most of my interviewees gave similar answers to Legault and were quite adamant about their ineffectiveness. Bureau-Blouin admitted that petitions did nothing to change the situation. Laurent Gauthier was even more pessimistic about the role of petitions: "Petitions by themselves don't do much. Maybe they can create awareness, but that's pretty much it" (L. Gauthier, personal communication, January 28, 2014). Myriam was similarly pessimistic: "I would say no. I think that maybe it can help to bring visibility to a cause, but I think it's only to get people to realize that something is happening, but it stops there" (Myriam, personal communication, Feb. 19, 2014). Provost was slightly more optimistic about using petitions as a tactic: "I'm really skeptical with the effect... I saw the petition as a pressure... to start with the petition and after the demo and then the strike and occupation. But the petition is really low-level. You have to do it, but it isn't really effective from my point of view" (A-M. Provost, personal communication, February 18, 2014). And while

she was likewise hesitant about championing their benefits, Lafrenière rightly insisted that they could be used effectively as part of an escalation of tactics. Despite their perceived ineffectiveness, petitions were nonetheless utilized by the students as one of the initial tactics used in a series of escalation of tactics. As Lafrenière pointed out, the petitions served a dual purpose in the beginning of the strike, by providing information and proving to be insufficient, thus necessitating adopting different tactics which included the strike.

Legault (2014) described other examples of the pressure escalation tactics that the students used which included the aforementioned privileging of direct democracy and horizontal leadership. This allowed the students themselves to decide upon the importance of the issues and how to react. Some students began mobilizing. Some began training other students how to coordinate a strike. Many students took to informing even more people about the situation while attempting to garner support. Different initiatives were taken, which not one group had control over because of direct democracy and horizontal leadership. This particular tactic also allowed for different modes of personal participation in the strike.

Legault (2014) was also quick to point out that “getting in touch with other groups and organizations who support your demands and support you” is key to any movement. For ASSÉ, reaching out to these allies helped them build a much stronger movement, as some groups were able to provide outstanding and invaluable resources (Legault 2014). But perhaps most importantly, in incorporating pressure escalation as part of their arsenal of tactics, members of ASSÉ were able to introduce “ideological debates over violence” (Legault 2014). In other words, students were given the opportunity to understand the issues and decide for themselves prior to “hearing them from corporate media” (Legault 2014).

Perhaps the best explanation of the pressure escalation that the Quebec students adopted comes from Fournier. Fournier pointed out that the strike took years of planning and did not “happen overnight,” and that pressure escalation was fundamental to the success of the movement:

People in small groups deciding to see if it’s possible for them to do a small thing and seeing gains through that process. And that’s how it starts. The process of escalating growth that eventually becomes exponential and in a sort of thoughtful exercise of escalating pressure tactics. We don’t go right from . . . “There’s a tuition fee increase, so let’s go shut the city down.” That’s not the process. First we’ll do a letter writing campaign. And even if . . . as someone who has gone through this process a few times in a few different campaigns . . . even if those tactics pretty much never work, you have to do them because later on, it becomes essential in your messaging to say that “We’ve tried everything else.” And it becomes essential to say that to the unconvinced students. The ones asking, “Do we really have to go on strike? Do we really have to throw away our semester? Can I really take this risk?” You can say that this is really the only way because we’ve tried everything else. (M. Fournier, personal communication, January 31, 2014)

For Fournier, the escalation of tactics occurred over a span of several months. The worry was that people who were not involved in the strike would only see the end results, not understand that tactics were escalated after previous ones had failed, and thus react negatively to the

students' actions. To sum up, the effectiveness of the Quebec student protests depended heavily on their use of both diversity of tactics and pressure escalation. The students' success, arguably, was largely assisted by the use of these tactics.

### **Discussion**

In addition to the four tactics explained in this article, the Quebec students certainly used many more during Maple Spring. In their fight against the Liberal government, the striking students and their supporters were united as a group, yet drew from a variety of tactics in addition to the red square, and the three others analyzed in this paper. A plethora of examples of various other tactics used effectively by the students included the use of social media, humor, song and music, art, and the casseroles. My results clearly suggest that the tactics used by the students were invaluable to their struggle. Other movements would be well-advised to consider using these tactics in their own battles.

Within the activist community, I often hear it said that “nothing happens overnight” and that it sometimes takes a while for change to occur. This is true when one considers the length of time it took for the abolition of slavery, women's rights, and LGBT rights to become commonplace within our society. And when looked at objectively, despite all the positives associated with them, all three can still be further improved. As the battle against austerity measures and neoliberalism appears to be a long one, maybe the Quebec student strike can serve as a marker and a model for a successful fight against these things.

The students purposefully fought the proposed tuition hike not just to stop the increase in 2012, but to also stop “the ones that are destined to follow it” (Marin 2012). Although the ultimate goal was winning, perhaps it was the process that they undertook which we, both scholars and the public, should focus on. Perhaps a functional model to combat any and all perceived social injustices including neoliberalism, austerity measures, economic injustice and the increasing gap between the rich and the poor, the Middle East conflict, and the growing climate worries, to name a few, can be developed from studying and learning from the Quebec students' model and the tactics that they used. Certainly, they provided us with many tactics to consider. And many lessons can be learned from their struggle.

I began this project to seek out answers as to what differentiated the Quebec student strike of 2012 from other youth-led uprisings. In search of answers, I was instead gifted with not just answers but also amazing stories; stories that detailed the inner workings of the 2012 Quebec student strike. I was told of stories that explained how one individual, Laurent Gauthier, almost single-handedly managed to coordinate and accommodate for the transporting of 10,000 protesting students to Quebec City during a snowstorm. Stories of students organizing nightly demonstrations and marches for a span of three consecutive months with the help of social media were recounted. There were stories of parents and elderly grandparents joining in the marches, banging pots and pans, le casseroles, to show both their support for their children and grandchildren and their resentment towards the Liberal government. Instead of one cohesive story, the 2012 Quebec student strike is comprised of a multitude of differing narratives; concurrently in variation, in unison and in unity. In sum, the Quebec student strike of 2012 was a complex multi-faceted story of students that stood up to power: a story that needed to be told.



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