

# Vivre de combat

a critique of CL(ASSE)



What I refer to as the “CL(ASSE)” is the CLASSE (La Coalition large de l’Association pour une Solidarité Syndicale Étudiante) and the post-CLASSE ASSÉ (l’Association pour une Solidarité Syndicale Étudiante). Although distinct in a few ways (several mandates and associations) the one dissolved into the other, and can not be discussed separately.



Following the strike, many ‘radicals’ have taken to elaborating *how* the CL(ASSE) accomplished an assumed *what*. Its form is praised, its content misunderstood and its function left at “victory.”

# I.

## Content

A common misconception about the CL(ASSE) is that it is anti-capitalist. It is not. The CL(ASSE) is a social democratic organization – simply look at its stated goals. This politic lies at the heart of every pronouncement that tuition hikes are a “political choice” easily solved through “progressive economics.” The main aim of the strike for CL(ASSE) – blocking the tuition hike – was articulated invariably as a project of better management. Its logic is one of efficiency and harmony, easily achieved through better policy.

In the massive mobilization campaign before the 2012 strike, the CL(ASSE) used a few main propaganda tools. Of the most important pieces of literature was the “Faut-il vraiment augmenter les frais de scolarité” brochure produced by IRIS, an economic research institute in Montreal. It grounds the CL(ASSE)’s claims about the economics of tuition. The text goes through numerous arguments for why the tuition hike is unnecessary. The problem can be solved by a better distribution of funds; the universities can get more funding if the government taxed the rich more. The pamphlet reads “...increased tuition fees will change the way education is funded, favouring a private funding model over the principle of public funding.” In this equation, where the state is synonymous with the public, the goal is a massive welfare state, a benevolent paternalism, a capitalism with a human face.

The problem then transitions from just a question of tuition to one of distributive economics. So, for example, when faced with the question of funding for education, the CL(ASSE)’s Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois argues for a better Plan Nord, one where the profits from the exploitation of indigenous land are more evenly distributed among Quebec’s citizens.

‘Solutions’, though, are not only to be found by looking inwards. Placed at the top of pamphlets for the new “La gratuité scolaire” campaign launched in the aftermath of the strike (as well as prominently on the new website for that campaign for free education), a revealing graphic calls for Quebec to follow in the footsteps of other governments which have maintained financial accessibility to universities. The graphic ends a short homage to other countries’ free education with the reflexive injunction, “why don’t we join them?” Join who, the reader inquires? Well, Greece, Spain, Germany, Iceland, Morocco and Argentina to name a few. Placing all these states into the same graphic brings up too many contradictions to be adequately explored here. But regardless, do they actually believe one should look to the Greek state for guidance? They are perhaps confused by what some find inspiring in Athens these days.

“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.” Simple as that.

The CL(ASSE) hearkens back to a time before finance capital and deindustrialization; a poetics of war-industrial economies and state wealth. There is no analysis of ‘austerity’ and the crisis of which it is a product, beyond the fact that it is part of ‘neoliberalism’ and is ‘bad’. Even if they desire it, the hands of time can not simply be swung backward four decades. Today’s capitalism is not that of the late 60s and early 70s – the era which saw the birth of radical student syndicalism in Quebec. Quebec is not an isolated entity – in time or space. The age of a capitalism based on production, in North American, is gone. The Labour struggle which grounds syndicalist thought is all but decimated. The syndicalist “anti-capitalist” is painfully misguided. My last job was telemarketing – should I seize the phones? Or for my next job, tell me what a self-managed Canadian Tire looks like.

This confused ideal, drawing both from a history that never was and a present that isn’t, is successfully de-centered in most communication. The emphasis of most of the propaganda material is not on what they are fighting or fighting for, but how they are fighting. The importance given to a tactic (the strike) over what that tactic serves has been a boon for the CL(ASSE).

## II.

### Form

The disaffiliation wave that hit the FECQ (the federation of Cégeps; rival of the CL[ASSE]) was a long time coming. But so too was the massive wave of resignations that is plaguing the CL(ASSE). Nearly no committee is left unscathed. The Women’s Committee, the Social Struggles Committee, the Information Committee, and the Executive Committee have all seen multiple members resign. This received little to no coverage externally, and is internally chalked up to fatigue. The ASSÉ has not done a proper “reflection on activist exhaustion,” wrote the latest resigning executive in her resignation letter. And it is true; the fatigue is real, profound.

It is not just sleep that is missing. This collective exhaustion is the product of an ideology tired and worn. It is the weariness of a Leftist tradition that gasps with each authoritarian outburst and ideological convert.

The syndicalist form needs two components to maintain its growth and efficiency.

These are organization as ideology and an authoritarian structure.

The latter first.

The CL(ASSE) is not criticized for authoritarianism because it is based on direct democracy. First, then, we must approach direct democracy, as well as the structure which derives its legitimacy from direct democracy's moral weight.

Like the representative democracy which took power before it, and to which this form is its heir, direct democracy is the negation of autonomy in favor of majoritarianism. It is an extremely useful rhetoric, as it allows those who wield it to one-up power on its own terms. But such advantage of rhetoric comes at the cost of replicating what is ostensibly being opposed. It is certainly worth dwelling, at least for a moment, on democracy itself. Is it not at least strange that an ideology promoted by every Western ruling class is embraced in a slightly altered form by those who ostensibly oppose this social order? Direct democracy modifies representative democracy by extending authority. It grants to a larger group the ability to make decisions, laws, and codes for and over any given person. It never challenges the fundamental concept of a given institution's ability to rule. Ideas become opinions and opinions subjected to an official body. The official body then decides over the person how they can act. Direct democracy demands that decisions taken by a given body - in the CL(ASSE)'s case a general assembly - be respected by all.

I should be perfectly clear, however, that this is not an argument against general assemblies, public forums, or any other sort of gathering. The point here is that gatherings can function to promote projects, actions, strikes, without claiming a governing capacity or a greater importance than other forms of communication, decision-making, and interaction. Legitimacy becomes a function of the thing itself – what is said, done, and felt – not of the metaphysical morality of democracy. In any case, the reason these assemblies were treated seriously was not because of a rational debate surrounding democratic ideals. It was the result of a strong *rapport de force* springing from, well, force.

Direct democracy forms only one aspect of the CL(ASSE)'s structure. Although many decisions are made at GAs and congresses, most of the actual functioning and content is performed and carried out by councils and committees with more or less power depending on their role. The most powerful body is the Coordination Council. This council approves or finalizes most texts, delegates most duties, and shapes what is usually an unformed line from congresses. This Council is made up of representatives from all the committees and three other groups. The executive committee is the committee with the most influence and power. Take, for instance, the manifesto produced in July by the CL(ASSE). At a congress on June 17, where more than three quarters of the propositions were made by the executive com-

mittee, their proposal to write a manifesto passed. The mandate consisted of five positions: a democratic Quebec, a defense of public services, a “social ecology”, a combative syndicalism (*syndicalisme de combat*), and a feminist critique of the education system. These general principles were made concrete almost exclusively by the executive committee, which then got its seal of approval from the Coordination Council. The text was then brought back to congress for minor adjustments. This is the usual run of things.

All in all, there are merely a handful of people making the decisions. Like the Party, the syndicalist organization is run by those specialists at the top who know what is best.

---

When critiquing the CL(ASSE), the immediate response is often resentment. How could one critique that which created the strike? Due to the question itself.

The CL(ASSE)’s structure was used as a basis for organizing, and without it, the strike would have been utterly changed. The CL(ASSE) structured the strike proper. But, in case one forgets, people organized the strike, enforced it, planned demos, manif-actions, and everything else that occurred during the strike. The reaction garnered by critique is not merely a cause of narrative. It is because, for many, the narrative is convenient. It locates power outside of any and every person.

The CL(ASSE) is something which creates, maintains and mediates relationships and decisions. This is simultaneously a process of homogenization and direction. As a part of any committee, one’s task, role, and “comrades” are pre-determined. Instead of affinity one has committee. Time is spent with mandated projects and bureaucratic necessity. Solidarity is an organizational reflex.

Most of what is called “the strike” – what occurred beyond the university and Cégep walls – was arranged outside of the CL(ASSE). Manif-actions (targeted attacks, blockades and occupations) were almost exclusively planned by groups of roughly 3-10 people, depending on circumstance. Their organization was not overly complicated. Small groups of people also planned and carried out the smoke bombings on the metro, replacing advertisements for propaganda, most demonstrations, attacks on police, etc.

---

The problem of the CL(ASSE) is a problem of syndicalism. The syndicalist organi-

zation takes itself to be the vehicle of revolt. It must continue existing and expanding; it becomes the thing to be defended. The more strength it gathers, the more the syndicalist organization equates itself with resistance. Once this equation is made, it attempts to consume resistance – to make the resistance a part of *it*. It attempts to other what is outside of it, not only from itself, but also from what it now claims as its own. May 4 in Victoriaville was one such moment. On a day of intense clashes outside of the Liberal Party convention, the spokesperson of the CL(ASSE) called what occurred “unacceptable.” It was an attack on the ruling party’s authority. A day, like April 20 and others, when the state’s paramilitary could not simply enforce its rule. But, to the CL(ASSE), this was “an escalation of the confrontation . . . which does not help at all to resolve the current conflict. The CLASSE will immediately return to the negotiating table. We still believe in dialogue.”

The tool transforms into ideology. Syndicalism rests on programmatic notions of resistance. According to this thinking, ‘change’ is effected through a charted course. There is a plan of action with linear points of escalation, all with dates attached. This ideology, which passes as organization, is in fact a form of control. From one point to the next, the syndicalist organization graphs the resistance and its dénouement. If one believes in this progressive account, inevitably the belief in the organization which sets the dates follows. The person in the syndicalist organization becomes the syndicalist and *combat* becomes *syndicalisme de combat*.

### III.

#### Function

We are told that if you opposed the hike, you fall into one of two categories. On the one hand you have the ‘moderates’ or ‘lobbyists’ (depending on who does the telling) – the Federations. On the other, the ‘radical’ student group – the CL(ASSE).

It is a very nice picture to have drawn, and one that limits perspective as well as any two-party competition. The false dichotomy filters the strike into a logic that is comprehensible, palatable, and useful to those in power. It is convenient to have two sets of groups, both willing to negotiate, each appealing to different ends of a defined political spectrum.

The convenience is more than just formulaic. The CL(ASSE) itself is useful to the state. I hear often that the CL(ASSE) is not just one thing, it is a coalition of various political tendencies; it is a gathering of people in order to put aside certain differences so that we may, together, resist. What is lost in all this talk of coalitions and associations is that, like all unions, this union, the CL(ASSE), has a politics, a

function, a role; these are well-defined and meet certain ends.

The CL(ASSE) is useful because it negotiates. It sees itself as a moderator of ‘student’ interests. The executives and media team will sit, like all good politicians, behind the closed doors of a negotiating room and barter away popular revolt for a good deal. The state needs this. It needs those who see themselves at the head of a certain group because then it can deal with the crisis. They speak the same language of representation. The determination of whether this representation was *good* or *bad* then is made by each association – democratically of course!

The CL(ASSE) is useful because it collaborated in the Parti Quebecois’ rise to power and the wave of a resurgent nationalist politics. The nauseating celebrations that took place on September 4 were not just about tuition hikes being canceled. Who canceled the tuition hikes? The PQ was seemingly the political solution to the CL(ASSE)’s economic demand. It was perfectly fitting for a campaign directed against Charest and his Liberals. This collaboration with the new government was followed by proclamations about “remaining mobilized” and vigilant against the indexing of tuition, etc. These meaningless words were made all the more so when the CL(ASSE) decided to participate in the discussions leading up to the Education Summit announced by the PQ. Now, the CL(ASSE) may backtrack and not participate, only so as to wait for a better opportunity to sit down in government offices. Regardless of whether they do or do not participate in the summit, the aim driving the decision will be identical.

## IV.

### Implications

As negotiators, the CL(ASSE) acted on the basis that tuition hikes were the source of tension. The strike, the revolt, was reduced to bureaucratic mandates every other weekend. As incisive and broad analyses were widely distributed, read and acted upon, the CL(ASSE) as an institution had no choice but to trudge along in the shackles of its positions and talking points. For the last two years, the ASSÉ had spent all of its time talking about tuition. In the midst of a strike there were relationships and affinities to create. There were skills to learn. There were internalized patterns of oppression and control to struggle against. There were police, banks, state buildings, and other structures of domination to attack. How was, and is, tuition posited as the main point day after day, with brief mentions of an ambiguous social strike as the weak spice to a bland rhetoric?

This rhetoric is sometimes complimented by opposition to ‘trends’ of the univer-



sity. They say to oppose the 'corporatization' or 'commodification' of the university. What does this mean? These are not, as the CL(ASSE) would have it, *issues*, to be addressed by this or that alteration. The university is commodified because the basic unit of capitalism is the commodity. The university is corporatized because the corporate form dominates the market. The university is not, nor can it be, an autonomous institution. The crisis of the university is the crisis of society. If one opposes commodification of the university, oppose the commodity. If one opposes corporatization, oppose the corporation. If one opposes these, oppose that which defends them and maintains their rule.

---

It is said quite frequently that the strike opened up spaces of possibility. This is true. It is also easy to say. What is more difficult is to articulate the content of those possibilities. Here is a start: the strike was one tactic exposing the potential to transcend, i.e. to negate, the conditions which created it.

Student organizing as student is obvious and implicit. Today there is little room for else. Unions are found nearly everywhere. Like other powerful institutions, their utility is resources – to siphon when useful. The point, though, is this self-organization's impulse towards overcoming the basis for that organization. Struggles to preserve social roles will necessarily remain within the structure which produced them, again and again, no matter how intense the struggle becomes. The maintenance of a role and the relation this implies is vital to the ruling order. Said another way, what generates limits. Pushed to its limit, the condition becomes opportunity.

The process of returning to class (or becoming an itinerant dropout in need of work) is revealing. Coercion is exposed momentarily in all its glory. With no caps and gowns and claims to eternal truths, the threat is clear. In August, universities promised to fail everyone, to cancel the semester. The infamous Loi 12 (Projet de la loi 78) – issued in May – actually worked. The main point was never the protests. It was always to efficiently re-start the universities and Cégeps, and, without exception, they all began again. The government, in suspending the semester – freezing the strike – created the conditions for a return to class. Thousands in Montreal, who desired to continue, were overrun. The CL(ASSE)'s model was the necessary compliment to the state's.

-Akher  
Montreal,  
January 2013





*“The CL(ASSE) is useful because it negotiates. It sees itself as a moderator of ‘student’ interests. The executives and media team will sit, like any good politicians, behind the closed doors of a negotiating room and barter away popular revolt for a good deal. The state needs this. It needs those who see themselves at the head of a certain group because then it can deal with the crisis.”*