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Adopting strategies instead of symbols

Prairie Struggle

2013

We are all inspired to picket in solidarity with Quebec students for various reasons, and we have every reason to be. They are fighting the recent trend of increasing user costs to public services, they have built a movement numbering in the hundreds of thousands, that is increasing daily; they are winning their struggle despite draconian laws, and heavy police enforcement, and they are picketing night after night with no relent. Perhaps the most visual inspiration has been the red square in solidarity with La CLASSE, and the recent emergence of nightly pots and pans rallies to support the students. These visuals have come to represent for many of us the power of collective action, and the ability to resist oppressive government policy. For some, this is inspiring thoughts of invoking these symbols to advance our own political agendas outside of the student movement in Quebec. However, prior to doing so, the implications of this should be considered.

These symbols are meant to represent a specific set of actions—a general strike and callouts to participate in it. We have responded to these calls, and have set up solidarity pickets in our

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respective cities. To suddenly use these symbols for our agenda changes their meaning. Rather than standing in solidarity with students in Quebec in their fight against the Charest government and its oppressive policies, the struggle would transform away from the hike, and law 78 to become something else, perhaps something more general. On the surface, this isn't wrong. Certainly, the Harper government is anti-worker, undemocratic, and has put a target on many of our rights. Yes, Brad Wall and the Sask Party are working to destroy unionism in this province, and to sell off our crowns. However, would it be right to change the meaning of La CLASSE's symbols? Does solidarity end after one night simply because we have found something that caught on? Our response is no.

First, it has taken students years to build this strike, and the students have made great sacrifices to enforce their demands that the hike be cancelled, and law 78 repealed. An entire semester of schooling has been lost, hundreds have been arrested and/or fined, and hundreds have been injured by police repression of the strike. La CLASSE needs to win this struggle, and we stand in solidarity because we want to see them win in spite of law 78, and violent repression. By changing our solidarity picket to fight some issue only vaguely related to the strike dilutes the demands of students. Their symbol- the red square- might come to represent our issues, not theirs. Their callout tactic- the pots and pans rally- would be used to publicize our issues, not our solidarity with the student general strike. In short, changing the issue at this stage would risk the struggle we gathered around in the first place.

Second, there is still a lot of confusion on what these symbols mean. La CLASSE subscribes to a type of unionism referred to as 'Combative Unionism'. Part of this brand of unionism is striving to build a democratic, militant resistance to achieve goals. It isn't time to change the meaning of this. The students in Quebec have spent years building this strike, and as a result have been prepared to confront the government to push

their demands. In Regina, and elsewhere this building is in a premature stage, or has not happened at all. We gathered spontaneously to support an issue — that of the general strike. The organizing required to successfully find a separate goal, and mobilize to fight it and win hasn't occurred. The Quebec student general strike has shown the level of repression government will call upon to resist our demands. If we are not going to organize around the ideas of combative unionism, including its militancy, deploying its symbols risks diluting the struggles it originally represents, and this is anything but a show of solidarity with Quebec students.

An excellent first step to linking struggles in Quebec and Saskatchewan is to fight to achieve victory in this strike. Governments and big business have been working across borders for decades to impose austerity measures on ordinary people. It is time that we respond with equal measure. With the breakdown of the most recent round of negotiations this has become more important than ever. Our message to Premier Charest must be that the strike will continue to grow until he drops the hike, and bill 78. In Saskatchewan, this can best be done in short term by expanding our pickets, not changing their meanings. To fight our own oppressions and the Harper government we should be adopting their strategies instead of their symbols.