

# Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois: the student strike and beyond

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"A Year After the Maple Spring" was the theme of a talk by Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois, of the Coalition large de l'Association pour une solidarité syndicale étudiante (CLASSE), the major coalition of organizations engaged in the 2012 Quebec student strike. Sponsored by Gatineau Monde, the former student leader spoke at the Maison du citoyen on September 25.

Nadeau-Dubois opened with a disclaimer. "My reflections are personal. There were many different points of view from participants in the struggle. I would be wary of those who tried to monopolize the movement." In any case, the last word on the events of 2012 has not yet been said: "There is still work to be done."

The Quebec Liberal government's 2010 budget amounted, he declared, to a cultural revolution. That March, the Liberals put in place substantial increases in the cost of gas and child care. The cost of higher education was to also increase in two years giving the students that time to mobilize their forces. The next year, the amount of the proposed tuition increase was announced: \$1,520. At the end of 2011, CLASSE was formed, with the support of unions and other progressive forces.

Nadeau-Dubois referred to the Parent Commission's 1966 report advocating free, post-secondary education. Fundamentally, he argued, "Education is a social institution." It is vital to the formation of the middle class and to individual and social wealth. "Quebec's social, economic, and political independence depends on it."

In response to CLASSE's demand to freeze tuition, the Charest government and its conservative economic advisors argued that the cost to government would be too high. But, he argued, low tuition is needed to maintain the strength of the middle class. "The current middle class are beneficiaries of the low fees, as a result of which we have today the most educated generation of Quebecers."

Nadeau-Dubois charged that Charest's government had a program of austerity and privatization which constituted "a rupture with the Quebec model" of the social welfare state. The student strike was an action "against this attack on the middle class."

Strikers faced a campaign of delegitimization, confronted with "the big lie" that they were resorting to force against their opponents. Quite the opposite, he said, citing the example of one CEGEP, where the football team in the crowd attempted to disrupt the meeting. By contrast, he said, CLASSE members chairing such mass meetings went out of their way to give strike opponents the opportunity to make their case.

Nadeau-Dubois described the mass meetings to decide on the strike as an important exercise in democracy. He contrasted this kind of democracy with our standard electoral system—"private and institutional" versus mass participatory democracy. Democracy, he said, "is not confined to Parliament." Is there to be nothing between elections? People express their democratic will in other fashions. He urged a big "no" to "obey-ism."

There is, he believes, a need to expand the participatory form of democracy beyond the issue of tuition fees, as a major force for social change.

The Bulletin asked for his response to the fact that both Philippe Couillard, leader of the Liberal Party, and Parti Québécois Premier Pauline Marois favour increasing tuition fees in tandem with increases in cost of living. Nadeau-Dubois replied that while such increases would not be as terrible as what Charest intended, they are "headed globally in the wrong direction." He also noted that while the cost of living is increasing, incomes are not.