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Title: Contesting Neoliberal Austerity: the case of the Québec Student Strike and the “Maple Spring” of 2012

Double digit youth unemployment rates, the accelerating casualization of work, and continuously deteriorating educational conditions have led young people and students to take center stage in struggles against the current global austerity agenda. This presentation will discuss the successful student strike and “maple spring” that took place in Québec in 2012. In 2010, the government of the Québec Liberal Party announced a 75 percent increase in post-secondary tuition fees over five years, effective in autumn 2012. This policy was depicted as a way to maintain the province’s competitiveness in a “global knowledge economy” by injecting new monies in its university network at a time of limited state financial capacities and mounting public deficits. Crucially, it was also explicitly introduced as part of a broader “cultural revolution” aimed at imposing the principle of a user-payer model and the commodification of public services. The Québec student movement reacted by launching a campaign that eventually escalated into a massive student strike and transformed into a broader popular movement – one of the largest in Canadian history – entailing massive demonstrations of hundreds of thousands in Montréal, as well as a myriad of other demonstrations and actions of civil disobedience across the province. The strength of the movement forced the Liberal party into elections, which it lost to the Parti Québécois, who had promised to cancel the tuition hike if elected. The presentation will describe the democratic and activist model of student unionism that made this impressive mobilization possible. It will also explain how, during a previous strike in 2005 and again in 2012, student unions were able to go beyond immediate demands (the cancellation of the hike) by developing and successfully disseminating a counter-discourse in opposition to the neoliberal paradigm. A core dimension of this discourse has been developed against the neoliberal conception of education as a commodity purchased by individuals seeking to improve their value on the labour market. Student organizations have been impressively successful at publicly promoting a vision of education as a common good and a social right that ought to be free and publicly funded. The strength of the movement eventually led to the cancellation of the fee increase, but also induced a limited yet significant reshaping of public debates on issues related to post-secondary education in Québec. A central thesis of the presentation will be that the development of a counter-hegemonic and anti-neoliberal discourse was made possible by a cycle of large-scale, democratic social mobilizations organized from below by self-active participants.