

What 300 students did on their Easter break

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It had been rumoured since September of 1981 that tuition, then standing at \$950, could increase by as much as 25 per cent at U de M. This was due to the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission (MPHEC) recommending a 16.5 per cent increase. As Brenda Coté, then-student President, now Canadian Federation of Students (CFS) chairperson, said, "They (the Administration) usually tacked about 5 per cent on top for their own purposes."

By April, U de M students had already taken one major action against the proposed tuition increases - one which, ironically, would serve to further the communications breakdown between Administration and students.

At a general meeting of the student union attended by 500 students mid-way through the second term, the students' representative on the Board of Governors was removed from his position. The reason FEUM has given for his dismissal is he "was in favour of tuition fee increases and often took individual decisions without any consultation with the students", according to a communiqué. However, this left the students with no representative on the Board of Governors. The Board had to accept the revocation before any elections could be held, and this they never did.

The Board meeting called for April 3, 1981 finally pushed the students into action. It was known by FEUM that, in past years, tuition fees were discussed and settled at that time, so the student executive approached the Board's President to be permitted to present a paper on tuition fees at the Board meeting. The president responded by stating the meeting was "closed" and "students already had a member on the Board" (the revoked position). To protest this lack of input, FEUM organized a rally to be held during the meeting as they still thought it possible to communicate their position to the Board.

That hope evaporated quickly.

The under 60 students who gathered outside the Taillon building that Saturday afternoon to try and communicate their position to the Board had a surprise awaiting them. Right on schedule, Board members arrived at the building, passed through the group of students, and entered the building. But then they kept going.

"The Board left quietly through a back exit."

Faced with the small group of students, the U de M Board decided to change the meeting's location, even though the students were waiting outside to speak to them. After a fifteen minute discussion, the Board of Governors members left quietly through a back exit to meet on the twentieth floor of a Moncton office building. When the students finally discovered the Board's quick exit, another four hours passed before students could uncover the meeting's location. The three students chosen to make the trip downtown for one last attempt at communication found an empty meeting room, save for the President of the Board of Governors and Gilberte Finn. And all either would say was no final decision had been made on the tuition scale. "We were pretty discouraged," recalled Steve Alexander.

Immediately upon the return of the group from their talk with Finn, a student union general meeting was called for the next day, Sunday the fourth, to decide on a course of action. By then, the lines in the dispute were too carefully drawn for there to seem any hope of reconciliation. Something had to give, and FEUM was going to put the pressure on.

At that general meeting on Sunday afternoon the decision was made to occupy the Taillon Building. 250 students attended the meeting on a half-day's notice, their mood one of resignation. "We had to occupy the building," says Alexander. "It was a way to get our point across."

After deciding on a basic plan of action, the general meeting continued while the occupation was being staged and carried out.

Access to the building was gained through the Kacho, a student-operated nightclub located in the basement of the Taillon building. The Kacho had its own entrance separate from the main entrances and was separated from the rest of the Taillon building by one locked door. "All you had to do was unscrew the door and you had the whole building to yourselves," said Rachael Roy.

At 11:00 p.m. the hundred or so students who congregated in the Kacho unbeknownst to University Security began shutting up the building, barring and locking all windows and doors. There was at least one confrontation



that first night, however. According to Alexander, "Security (guards) managed to get in the night we occupied, and they advised the students to leave. The students then advised the security people to leave. They did."

All this time, the general meeting of the Moncton student union was still continuing the task of organizing a possibly lengthy siege. Committees were struck (and filled) for anything considered an important area of the occupation. Among the committees formed were the Security committee (of which Steve Alexander became head), board and lodging, negotiation (where Rachel Roy took part), education and mobilization, media, health, and finances. The meeting lasted until 4:00 in the morning, when the committees were set into action.

For an undertaking called so quickly, the ideas brought up by that opening general meeting worked surprisingly well, needing little or no revising during the next week. On Monday morning of April 5, only students (with identification) and cafeteria staff were allowed in the Taillon building. As the student residence's cafeteria is located on the first floor of Taillon, it was kept open for the duration of the occupation. "We didn't want to do anything wrong to students," said Rachel Roy.

Besides residence people, the occupation committee was faced with the problem of feeding and lodging 250-300 occupants of the building. To ensure the student protesters were eating well, money from donations went towards three specially-planned meals a day, plus something set aside for midnight snacks. "We probably ate better than the residence people," said Brenda Coté.

It was decided soon after the occupation began that the same few people could not stay in the building all the time. To assure that occupying students slept in real beds some nights, a rotation was set up with residence students volunteering their rooms and beds for Taillon occupants.

With this rotation system almost 600 students were involved with the occupation, out of 2500 students in total at l'Université de Moncton, said Alexander. General meetings held twice daily to govern the students' actions had attendance nearing 1,000 every time. And support was coming in from other areas as well.

Moral support and financial contributions began coming in almost immediately from all sources imaginable. Moncton labour unions, the Dalhousie Student Union, the Maritime Fisheries Union, and the Canadian Federation of Students are only a few of the groups who issued statements of encouragement to the students. Professors from the Moncton Faculty Union (ABPUM) also joined in, undertaking mediation for the students after a meeting attended by 125 professors on Wednesday. Then came the first sign of the danger ahead for the protesters - the first arrest.

"Barricades had been set up."

On Monday and Tuesday, the first two days of the occupation, barricades had been set up in the city streets which run through Moncton campus. According to Roy, the barricades were never seen as a means of "sealing off" the campus or stopping classes, but rather as a means of publicizing and drawing attention to their ongoing struggle. Located in the heart of Moncton, the barricade caused monumental traffic snarls and "upset quite a few people", admits Roy. There was never any attempt to stop people from walking across or to the University along with the barricade.

The barricade was broken on the Tuesday by Moncton city police, the first time they figured in the occupation

story, but it would not be the last. Mainly unilingual English, the Moncton police force repeatedly failed to have any French-speaking officers on duty during actions against the occupants. This communication gap is all the more important considering what occurred on Tuesday the seventh.

While breaking the barricade, Moncton police arrested and charged one megaphone-carrying student for "inciting to riot". His role on the scene was in reality not quite so inflammatory. "The student at the barricades was using the megaphone, telling the students to be quiet, be calm, sit down and respect the police. Then they arrested him," said Coté.

"He said we had a bomb set for 10:00."

Almost immediately, students included in their demands the dropping of charges against the arrested student. As for their other demand, the U de M students had a single, and they claimed negotiable, demand - a freeze on tuition. "We had to start somewhere (in negotiating)," stated Roy. However, this appeal didn't sway Gilberte Finn at all. Cyrille Godin, a student spokesperson, said, "He told us personally he is against freezing tuition." The negotiating committee soon found their efforts stifled by an "uncompromising attitude" on the part of the administration.

The long wait for the end had begun.

In the meantime, the students in charge of keeping the building secure had their hands full with the University's security guards. According to Roy, "Every day they'd try to infiltrate through back doors and places like that. We had to have people at every entrance.

"With the importance of security and the number of people we had, some people watched doors for 24 hours straight," she said.

This didn't prevent one dangerous breach of security early in the occupation, though. On Monday (April 8), the occupation leaders allowed the chief of University Security in to satisfy himself the building was not being vandalized. That mistake seriously threatened the occupation the same day.

While being given a tour of the students' arrangements in Taillon, the Security head was also noting flaws in their hastily-arranged security plan. The same day, "They (security guards) gained access and re-took their security office within the building," said Alexander.

"The office was important because it contained the transmitting equipment that dispatched security all over campus. By listening to it we could tell what they were doing and where they were," Alexander recalls. He soon saw the need to somehow re-take the room and eliminate Security's base of operations within Taillon.

As a result, students were placed in various surveillance positions near the Security office to wait for something to happen. That something eventually was a worse security lapse on the part of the University guards. After becoming confident the communications post was safe, security guards began gradually leaving the office to fulfill their duties elsewhere on campus. "We waited until all the security guards but one had left. Then 30 students stormed into the small office and 'advised the guard to leave'. He locked himself in an office and got out through a window, terrified," Alexander said. "No threats were involved."

A somewhat less dangerous and more silly ploy was taken by the Administration mid-way through the occupation. "The Chief of campus police called on Wednesday morning to say we had a bomb that's going to explode at