

# The requisite raising of the placards

*Students came out in large numbers to protest the faculty strike. Should they be protesting everything else?*

BY GREG MCFARLANE

A throng of students stand in front of a stone building screaming, booing and hurling insults as a voice coming over a loudspeaker tells them that nothing can be done.

But this is not 1967 and this is no hippie movement. It is Dalhousie University, Mar. 17, 1997, and the 500 students standing in front of the conservative, grey-stone face of the MacDonald Building are protesting the standstill in contract negotiations between the Dalhousie Faculty Association and the Dalhousie Board of Governors.

But is protesting such as this the best way to get things done? The 500 students who drowned-out Dalhousie president Tom Traves' words with chants of "bullshit" may think so, but the answer differs depending upon who you talk to.

According to Kevin Lacey, the Dalhousie Student Union [DSU] vice-president academic/external, the most effective way to make governments and university administrators take notice of students is through effective lobbying, not protesting.

"The DSU has a new, changed voice," Lacey said.

"If students want to reform the system or change the way that people think about the needs of students, we can't be so inwardly focussed. We have to consider the public perception of what we are all about."

But some students feel that protesting is a valuable tool for exerting pressure on governing organizations. And many students, including DSU counsellor Adel Iskandar, feel that the DSU rally against the contract dispute was not enough.

"The rally was late. It was definitely late," Iskandar said.

Although he agrees with lobbying, Iskandar says that student unions have to be more willing to take more radical measures and "show that students do matter".

"I don't see why student unions across Canada shouldn't take a strong stand in support of the students they represent," he said. "If the only way they can do so is by being activist, then so be it."

Paul Black, the Student Union president at Acadia University, agrees. He organized a protest against a faculty contract dispute at Acadia earlier this year — a deal was reached shortly before the strike deadline.

"Student leaders should not be

as afraid or wowed in the face of university presidents or members of the board of governors who may

The Nova Scotia Public Interest Research Group [NSPIRG] joined the DSU in the Mar. 17 protest. Jennifer Reynolds, of the NSPIRG executive, believes that protesting is a legitimate way for anybody in society to voice his or her displeasure. NSPIRG has held numerous protests this year over a variety of issues.

"A protest serves to mobilize," Reynolds said. "It brings people together who believe in a

The media also tends to focus on protests. Whenever there is a mob of angry people, you're likely to find a large contingent of reporters in tow. The spotlight is then usually shifted to the people whom a protest is directed at, and Black says that can create change.

"It's obvious that whenever [a lot] of people come out to protest something, and are vocal about it and have the media involved, it can't help but exert pressure."

story related to student debt," he said.

And the work the CFS did before the Day of Action made it all the more successful, says Lavigne.

"I had a meeting with the minister of finance a week before the demonstration. He knew it was coming up because of the lead-up media attention. This was nearly a month before he was set to release the national budget. One could not help but realize that student debt would be a big issue with the public's mind.

"Students know about debt, but we only make up a tiny fraction of the population. What about getting middle class parents with children on board? That's what we need to do. They are a much more politically influential strata of society."

Although lobbying is done outside the media spotlight, Lacey says it is still an effective way to make the media and the public take notice.

"That is the one big misconception — that protest gets you attention," he said before the Mar. 17 rally. "I haven't protested this year, and I am one of the most quoted sources within the local media. CFS simply doesn't get the coverage I get."

Lacey says that CFS may have caught the ear of the public with the Day of Action, but they haven't solved any of the problems facing students.

"[CFS] may make noise once or twice a year, but that's not the kind of effective voice that students need," he said. "What they need is a student union that speaks about solutions, not problems."

But Lavigne says that by complementing lobbying with protesting, an organization has a better chance of causing change.

"The Day of Action demonstrations complemented the work we had done beforehand," Lavigne said. "When an official of CFS is meeting with a federal MP, and there are students coming out in great numbers to back up what the official has said, then it is complementary. It is part of a calculated strategy. You cannot disassociate one activity from the other."

In the end, however, Paul Black believes that student unions are there to act upon the wishes of their students, whether that means being an 'activist' union or a 'lobbying' union.

"Student leaders should realize that they are there to lead and to lead means that you do not act solely on your opinion," he said. "What you are there to do is inform, take direction and act upon what it is that students want."

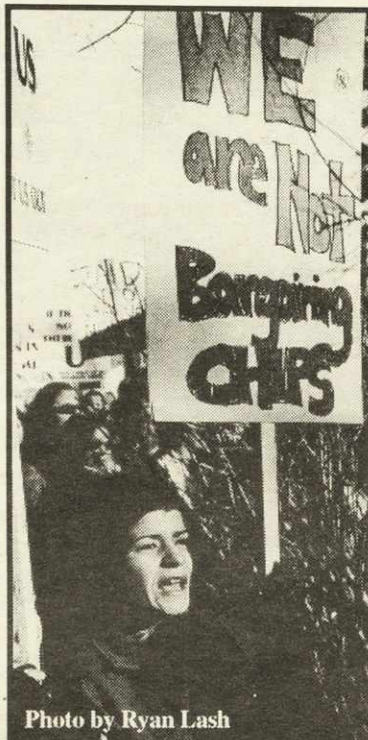


Photo by Ryan Lash



Photo by Luke Dobek

be imposing," Black said. "You have to stand up and say 'I know I'm right, because the students have told me this is what they want."

"I'll bring those views forward no matter how many times I am told they are wrong. When that doesn't work, I'm not afraid to take things to another level where it is merited."

However, Black admits that

common purpose but come from a variety of backgrounds.

"It isn't to antagonize, it's to draw a line and say, 'you can't push us any further'."

Reynolds also believes that staging demonstrations helps to

This was evident on Jan. 27 when the Canadian Federation of Students [CFS] held their National Day of Action rally in Halifax. The next night, CFS rallies taking place all across the country became the lead story on

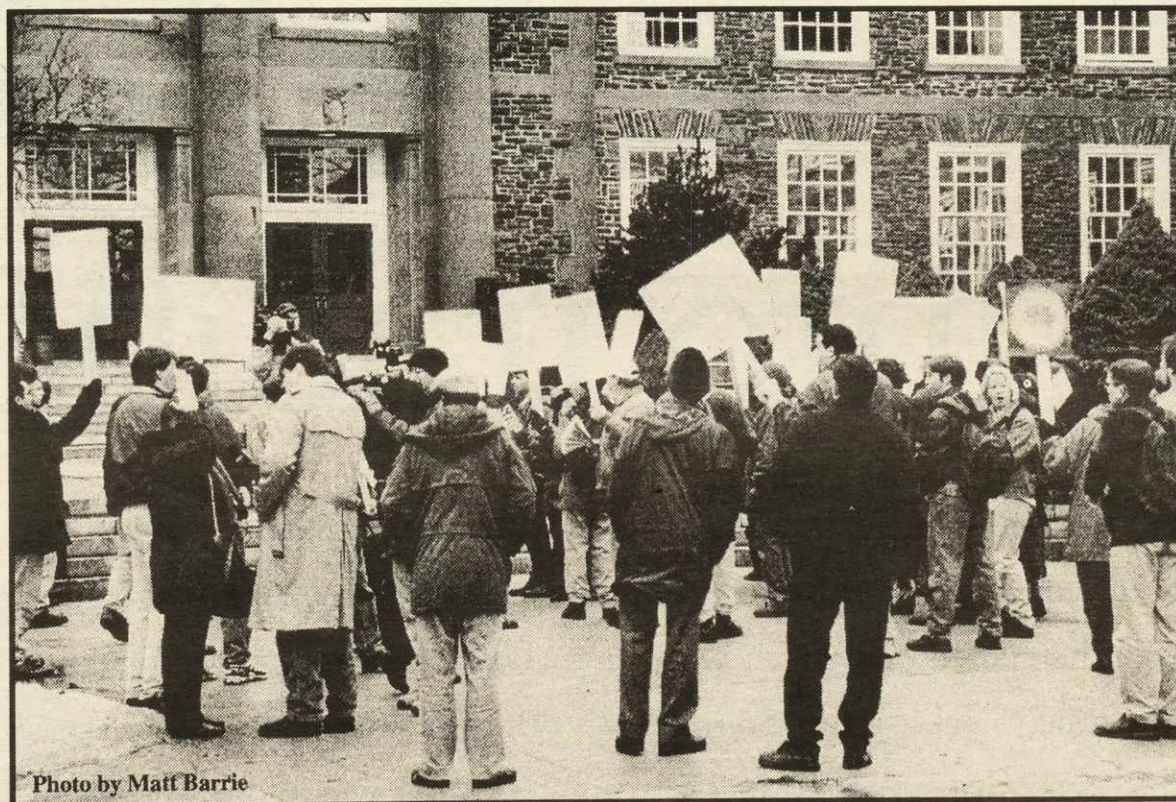


Photo by Matt Barrie

lobbying is the first approach to solving any problem.

"You can't automatically protest something without getting the facts straight and trying your best to convince the other side of the merits of your side. If you try until you're blue in the face and they are unequivocally saying 'no', then you move to other things."

get students more involved in the world around them.

"It solves a problem of apathy," she said.

"There is room for more political activism on campus. I don't know if the DSU should be doing more protesting, but there is a lot of room for students to get involved in every level of politics."

national newscasts.

CFS president Brad Lavigne says that the media blitz surrounding the Day of Action served to make student debt an issue for all members of society, not just students.

"You could not help, in the week of January twenty-eight, turning on your TV or opening your newspaper and seeing a