

Protestors shut down Quebec government complex

BY JONATHAN WEXLER AND JEFF WEBBER

MONTREAL (CUP) — Hundreds of students and social activists shut down a Quebec provincial government complex to protest government cuts to education, health care and social programs.

Protestors kept government workers out of l'Edifice Marie Guyant, which houses 4,000 civil servants, including those who work for the Ministry of Education. The action was dubbed "Plan G," because l'Edifice is also known as Complex G.

Government workers who arrived for work on the morning of November 3 were turned away by protestors, who formed human chains in front of the complex's 21 entrances by holding hands. The workers were told to return at 1:30 p.m. They were still unable, however, to enter the building. At that point, their employer, the Quebec government, sent them home.

The action was planned and executed by a broad array of community and student groups. Patrick Borden, a spokesperson for Canevas, a group dedicated to nonviolent protest, said each group was encouraged to bring their own grievances to the protest.

"What we are asking for are the traditional demands of the left, for fair trade and [a commitment] against neo-liberalism," he said.

Marion Parsons, a member of a women's group at Concordia University, said she was a staunch supporter of all the concerns expressed at the demonstration.

"[It's a] desire to see the

government listen to the people. Lots of people are here for different reasons telling the government to listen to us," she said.

Student groups involved in the action included organizations based in Quebec's colleges, le Mouvement pour l'Education Democratique and the "Y" group, the Canadian Federation of Students, and many student unions.

Three colleges even voted to shut down for the day.

Janine MacLeod, a student of humanistic studies at McGill University, said she took part in the protest to show her unhappiness with tuition increases in the province.

"I feel that the consistent rise in tuition is creating a very elitist situation in education and perpetuating a differentiation between the classes. Education should be universally available, and students shouldn't

be finishing their education with a \$30,000 debt," she said.

MacLeod said she was also opposed to differential tuition fees for out-of-province Quebec students. Because of this, non-Quebec students have seen their tuition jump by as much as \$1,000. It's something that Keer Tanchak, a B.C. student studying at Concordia, knows about first

hand.

"I don't want to be financially punished for coming to Quebec to study, because I'm paying more here than I did at home and I didn't know that when I came here," she said. "Quebec government, don't fuck with my mobility rights. I'm a Canadian citizen just like everyone else here."

The Quebec government, over the last several years, has cut \$800-million from its education budget. Funding for health care has also seen millions of dollars

in cuts, with several hospitals closing as a result. And social programs have also had their funds chopped.

Parsons said she was very concerned about the impact of cuts to social programs and in particular Quebec's welfare system. These cuts, she said, are having a serious impact on women's standard of living.

"The government recognized that there should be a low standard of living that no one should fall under, and then the welfare they offer is not enough to live on, so people are forced to work under the table," she said.

In addition to criticizing the government's policies, each of the numerous groups involved presented a list of demands to the government, an exercise organizers termed "direct

democracy."

Stacey Miller, a studio art student at Concordia university and a member of the International Socialists, said the day was important for building a progressive solidarity movement in the province.

"I think it's really important to do this, to talk to more people. I want to talk to people to build some solidarity, to build a network for future events. I think we have to keep the momentum going."

Borden added that the day provided an excellent opportunity for French and English Quebecers to work together for a common goal.

It is estimated that the day-long shut-down of Complex G cost the Quebec government \$500,000.

"Quebec government don't fuck with my mobility rights. I'm a Canadian citizen just like everyone else"

No more 1-900-RIP'D-OFF

BY SEAN RYAN

ST. JOHN'S (CUP) — Newfoundland's provincial government has scrapped its controversial 1-900 student aid number and replaced it with a toll-free service.

The decision means that students living outside the metropolitan St. John's area will no longer be charged while using the phone service through which they can obtain information about their student loans.

The new toll-free number came into effect November 7. Students had formerly been charged 40 cents a minute to use the service, which in some cases was higher than regular long distance rates.

The Memorial University of Newfoundland (MUN) student council had been pushing for the change for almost two years, due to students' complaints of large phone bills — some in excess of \$60 — caused by multiple calls

and long delays.

Newfoundland Premier Brian Tobin agreed to replace the line at a recent meeting between provincial student leaders and government officials.

"I told them I thought it was horrible that [the] government would charge students a fee for accessing information that they require," said Randy Miller, a student council vice-president at MUN.

He says the issue was debated at length before the premier "basically just got tired of the discussion and said, 'Alright, you got it'."

"We were surprised [with the announcement]," he said. "We've been fighting this thing for about two years and out of the blue the premier just says, 'Okay, give it to them'."

But Carl Cooper, spokesperson for the Department of Education, says there was nothing sudden about the decision.

"Obviously the 1-900 number was cause for concern," he said. "I

think everybody acknowledges that it was costing the students some money, and I guess, with the overall review and planning with regard to making access more efficient and more effective for students, it just happened at that time."

It was only last January, however, that Frank Marsh, assistant deputy minister of education, categorically ruled out the possibility of a toll-free student-aid line, saying it would be too expensive to maintain.

The new toll-free line is a positive step for students,

Miller says he was encouraged by the provincial government's willingness to deal with students' problems.

"I hope I'm not being too optimistic," he said. "But I think we've weathered the storm in the sense that all we've seen since 1992 is cutting and slashing, and we've seen absolutely no money getting put back."

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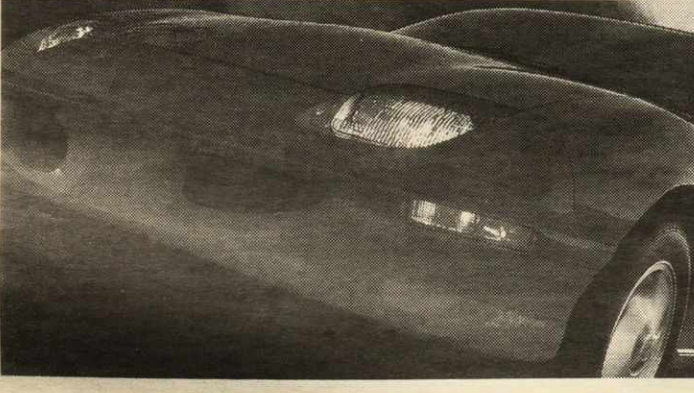


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