

Resignation letter to ASSÉ – Resignation letter of the committee of social struggles

Challenges, reflections, and recommendations

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To the student members of ASSÉ, to all of those with whom we have shared intense moments during the recent months ...

It has already been a while since we were a part of the Quebec student movement; in particular, the movement that gravitates around ASSÉ. We were pleasantly surprised and proud of what we were able to accomplish together. Yes, the strike. But also all the work around the principles of direct democracy, bringing these principles and demands, which we adopted together, to life.

Like many, we have a profound desire to embody radical social change, for a more just and egalitarian world — and in the world of education, as much as in society in general. Together, over the years, we have succeeded in uniting many people around these progressive values and practices.

This is why we wanted, each at different times and for different reasons, to get involved with ASSÉ's national team — a question of bringing grist to the mill of this beautiful machine of dissent.

Nevertheless, even though these principles are still as important as ever to us, and even though we believe that ASSÉ and the activists who constitute it have the potential to accomplish great things, for us, the honeymoon is over.

Despite the social justice values put forward by ASSÉ, there is an problem with embodying these same values within its structures. We are people engaged in struggle in diverse ways, who are rooted in anti-oppression values ... and, unfortunately, at this time, it seems impossible for us to do this work inside ASSÉ.

We have enormous respect and admiration for ASSÉ activists and we believe the organization will know how to change. We are writing this letter-zine with the goal of sharing our experiences with you, as well as the challenges we have faced over the recent months, in order to generate discussion. Maybe it can also help to shine a new light on the various resignations that have taken place over the recent months (and over the years).

In short, friends, colleagues, comrades, we are resigning from the social struggles committee.

While reading our letter, please be reminded that the act of naming a problem does not make it exist. On the contrary, in opening the conversation about issues that are sometimes complex and torturous, we can find solutions. In brief, while sensitive and difficult subjects will be broached, in no way is our objective to attack, insult, or humiliate anyone.

Rather, this process aims to report on events that took place and oppressions that were experienced, so that we can name and analyze them, with the goal of collectively finding solutions. The last thing we want to do is shame or cast a shadow on the work of our comrades; we want to open a dialogue in order to transform our practices. We have put a lot of energy into writing this text so that our message will be

received without provoking public outcry and so that the debate can be opened. This is why, at the end of this letter, we suggest opportunities for reflection to move past these challenges and bring forward some initial recommendations.

Despite the saying that we shouldn't try to change those we love, we think there is still a long way to go before ASSÉ becomes a space that is truly inclusive, supportive, and where activism is truly gratifying. It is for this reason that our resignation takes the form of a letter-zine of reflection for the orientation congress: we thought it could make a meaningful contribution toward the goal of rethinking the work that is done in ASSÉ.

P.S. We have chosen the letter-zine format to allow this reflection to exist across time and space, and be useful to many people (and also because it is more accessible and enjoyable to read.)

THE SOCIAL STRUGGLES COMMITTEE / LE COMITÉ AUX LUTTES SOCIALES (CLS)

For those of you who don't know us, the social struggles committee was formed last June by two elected representatives and several collaborators.

Our little committee was comprised mainly of women in first and second year, from UQAM, Concordia, and the Université de Montréal, in linguistics, geography/urban planning, and anthropology. We are people of diverse languages and origins.

ONCE UPON A TIME

The CLS tried to bring anti-oppression, anti-racist, anti-colonial, anti-imperial, and many other types of analysis into ASSÉ, to enrich the organization's reflections on the social situation in Quebec and the global context. Through our work, we tried to create links between issues concerning education and the numerous struggles affecting our lives. Consequently, the committee sometimes brought forth criticism of the internal functioning of the organization, which we believe is essential for a progressive organization, in order to ensure our practices correspond with our ideals.

However, we had already heard comments describing this committee as an affinity group. Our theory is that this was one of the only committees in ASSÉ that was working on projects outside the official lines of the national campaign. No, we weren't producing flyers for demonstrations and we did not limit ourselves to "creating international relationships for ASSÉ," but we thought this work of awareness-raising and widening of the social context of the struggle was just as important.

This situation left us with the strange impression that we were considered outsiders. Why? We don't know, exactly ... Because we weren't part of the same social circles? Because we came from other spheres? What we do know is that when it came time to present or get approval for our projects, much more energy and preparation was required than for other committees ... except when the proposals were brought forward by charismatic people who already had a lot of social capital in the organization.

We got the impression that some of ASSÉ's mandates were and still are *trivialized*, in the sense that they served mainly as decoration. They were dusted off from time to time, when it was useful; otherwise, we

stuck with the official line: free tuition. Of course, it makes sense that most of the energy was spent on this struggle; after all, it was our national campaign. However, if we want to live in accordance with our values and principles, we have to conceive of free tuition as a project from a feminist, anti-racist, anti-oppression, anti-imperial, anti-colonial, ... etc., etc., perspective. **These are not secondary struggles; they are analyses we must live up to in all our projects.** Sometimes, when we brought such critiques forward, we had the impression we were not heard. We were also accused of *not understanding the strategy*. Remember that these criticisms are not attacks; these criticisms come from the desire to improve the organization. They aim to be constructive, rather than destructive.

We were also sometimes accused of *doing nothing* or of not being active enough. Often, the myth that the social struggles committee *had never done anything* of importance was raised in informal discussion. Is this true? Or was this rather the result of very poor communication between its members and those of other committees?

Maybe it would be interesting to reflect here on the definition and mandate of the social struggles committee:

This committee aims to develop an action and communication network with other relevant unions and community organizations in Quebec and elsewhere, as well as with student organizations at the international level. In order to carry out this mandate, the committee ensures ASSÉ's presence at various organizational meetings and ensures follow-up with the relevant decision-making bodies (Congress, Coordination Council, Executive Council).

It also carries out research in order to add to the organization's reflection on the current social situation in Quebec and on the global context. The committee collaborates closely with the External Relations Secretary and the Communications Secretary as it tracks current events across society. (ASSÉ Bylaws, p. 22)

We believe that we worked hard to realize this mandate; you can see this for yourselves by referring to two reports we produced between July and December 2012. In an ideal world, we would have preferred to do more research, but the reduced capacity of the committee prevented us from putting this project at the forefront.

Furthermore, we perceived a certain disdain for racialized students, allophone or anglophone, as if their capacity to understand the issues and debates were put into question during the Coordination Councils, among other spaces (*instances*). Some people got the impression they were seen as less intelligent, because of a language difference or a different way of expressing themselves. Maybe these people did not have the same experience as others in francophone activist contexts, but their lives and experiences of social engagement are just as valuable. And, most importantly, it doesn't mean they don't have the same ideas or capacity for reflection as other people.

We got the impression that it was the white people on the committee who were always primarily addressed ... was that because communication seemed easier with them? How can we diversify the elected representatives on the national team and the executives of student associations? Why do we not see racialized students in the Congress and in other aspects and activities of ASSÉ, when they are numerous in attending our member colleges and universities? What space do we open for them? The experiences of racialized/non-francophone members of the social struggles committee and other students we know makes us believe there are not a lot of openings for them.

Racialized members of the social struggles committee consistently hesitated in going to the Coordination Council. Going became like a punishment (much more so than for the other non-racialized elected representatives). The environment and power relations experienced within this body are clearly aspects worth reflecting on, in order to make improvements. A mood minder could certainly provide support with respect to some of these aspects. In an ideal world, of course, we should all be conscious of what we say, and how it can impact others. But, fine. If we think it's necessary to have mood minders during Congress, they must absolutely be present during the Coordination Council.

In other communication between activists, either in person or the ASSÉ email list, the question was raised with respect to decision-making at the Coordination Council. If we get into this question, we must also get into power dynamics and relations, both lived and perceived — experienced versus the new, francophone versus non-francophone, the councils and committees with predominant social capital versus others, etc.

Also, the mere existence of a “social struggles committee” *sounds fishy*. A bit like the existence of a women's committee (you can see similar reflections in the different resignation letters of women's committee members over the past few years). The fact that these committees exist suggests that either the analysis has not been sufficiently internalized by the organization's members, meaning that it is not automatically invoked without the presence of such a committee, or it can also hinder this internalization by giving the impression that *this committee will handle the work*.

We must think about how we want to collectively embody these feminist, anti-oppression, anti-racist values. Certainly, there must be education and proper dissemination of knowledge. This is what we have tried to do, and we hope we succeeded at least a little bit. Nevertheless, we don't want to make a solidarity laundry list, saying that we are in solidarity with this or that struggle. We want to reflect on our structures, our relations, and also the space we make for reflection that falls outside the framework of the student struggle. **We cannot struggle against everything and that is not the point; the point is to change the way we struggle, because the biggest change begins there.** It's true, it's not easy, because we live within this system, but, ideally, we must try to avoid reproducing mechanisms of oppression and invisible violence. This is why an anti-oppression, anti-racist, anti-colonial argument must be developed and lived internally in ASSÉ. To do so, well, either we try to incorporate this analysis in all the committees or we give more autonomy to the social struggles committee.

THE CHALLENGES IN GENERAL, POWER RELATIONS AND CO.

(The following points are not in order of importance. We don't like hierarchy! And we know you don't either ...)

Dear ASSÉ, we have had enough of your **HIERARCHY**. Yes, yes, it's sad, we know, but it's insidious. It slips in everywhere. Apparently, it's normal; as we are an inherent part of the modern capitalist world (or maybe we should say neoliberal because it's frowned upon to talk about capitalism in ASSÉ), so is the hierarchy. As such, hierarchy creeps in to the core, even where we have tried to push it out.

We think that the executive has too much power and weight. Is this a structural problem? Maybe. Far too often for our taste we heard “Your role is to make decisions! Carry out your mandates!” during Congress, or “You don't have a mandate to make these decisions,” depending on what kind of official line the talking heads wanted to see adopted for the organization. Several incidents have remained stuck in our throats.

The Summer 2012 demonstration. In hindsight, were there not significant power dynamics between the executive and the delegations, when the latter asked to participate in the drafting process and the former answered that they didn't trust them enough, that the text would be too long, that they should "*let them do it*"?

And participation at the summit. We're sorry to come back to this. We know no one wants to talk about it anymore, but we have *heard it all*. During the Congress where the participation of ASSÉ at the PQ's summit on post-secondary education was to be decided, certain members of the national executive took up a lot of space at the mic, explaining to the delegations of member organizations how they should vote. "*No need for mandates. Your job is to make decisions. I will show you how to vote. Hurry up.*" The executive, or any executive, clearly has, in its own right, a great symbolic and cultural power. It wields a great deal of influence. Obviously, this is a two-way relationship; we don't think the delegations obeyed with their eyes closed but, when in doubt, we have certain reservations ...

In addition, the relations between committees, between the members of the committees and the executive, whether during the Coordination Councils or elsewhere, depended greatly on the personalities of individuals. We are aware that not everyone can get along. However, we think that everyone should be able to feel comfortable organizing together, even if great friendships are not involved, and, in this way, we must think of structures that permit nuance in power relations based on friendship or a lack thereof.

These are the same relations that we have seen within the **Coordination Councils (COCOs)**. In addition, in a small room with fewer people, where people know each other, power relations are perhaps more likely to arise. Some of us have had this experience.

Once again, we are not suggesting that activists or elected representatives obey the executive, or that the executive is a wicked beast trying to subordinate everyone to its desires. No. Otherwise, we would not bother to write to you. That is Bourdieu's concept, right? Symbolic violence, wielded invisibly, without intention or perception ... maybe we are giving too much weight (which could indeed be heavy to carry, we imagine they themselves will recognize) to this executive committee, and that, finally, they are the best positioned to know what to do, given that they hold the most information.

Speaking for ourselves, it is difficult to organize international events when the executive hesitates to share their international contacts and networks with us, for example. And how many people know that there are "wikis" for every student organization, containing a variety of information about them? It's a good idea, but they should be public and available to everyone, right?

In the long run, we think this hierarchy of responsibilities, right to informal veto, and information is harmful for everyone. We do not believe that employer relations should be established in an organization where everyone wants to be heavily involved and does so on a volunteer basis.

WELCOME AND INCLUSION

According to us, there is also **an organizational problem**. At this time, there are no structures of inclusion for new activists, or simply for activists who are different (for whatever reason), who do not fit into the usual homogeneity conducive to ASSÉ. Which means that power often remains in the hands of the same, those who have good friends, those who are close to the elected representatives of ASSÉ. The phenomenon of the UQAM clique, as it has previously been called. We don't think the problem is UQAM (we really like UQAM!). Rather, it is the lack of mechanisms of inclusion. Which means that those who have the most friends or, at least, the best charisma, the best relationships, win enormous cultural capital and see their goals met very quickly.

Obviously, cliques, gangs, friendships – these are normal, desirable, great! Except that the circle is mostly closed, and for people from other circles to want and be able to become involved in ASSÉ, in order for it to become open, diversified, and heterogenous, there must be space and structures to make this happen. For those who were not at “yesterday’s party,” it’s very difficult have a new idea accepted, a new project that diverges somewhat from the official line, that wasn’t already previously discussed around a beer.

We also realize that ASSÉ does not exist in a vacuum. By this, we mean that its activists are all as socialized in the real world as anyone else. Aware, yes, with good critical thinking, but it’s normal that not everyone would have completely integrated feminist, anti-oppression analyses, in the same way and at different levels. **That is why we think that, for the moment, watchdogs and critics of the practices of the student movement, both national and local, are essential.** This does not mean that we can’t collectively work on profound reflection on these relationships, to change them, to *make the change that we want to see happen in the world.*

CAPITALIST PRODUCTION

The same applies to **capitalist performance and the desire for production.** It’s not everyone who can do the work of ten horses for free, without sleeping or eating (OK, we’re exaggerating). Does this mean that we don’t want those people who cannot accomplish as much involved on the national team? How many times have we read in letters of resignation, “I don’t have the time, I’m exhausted.” Why don’t we accept people who produce below a certain level or why don’t these people feel accepted? And speaking of productivity and performance, it’s high time we thought about their **frequency, amount and length of meetings (instances), the conditions in which they are carried out,** etc.

This reflection was already initiated by the elected representatives attending the Coordination Councils and we think this is a good avenue for reflection. No more 8-hour meetings that end at 1:30 a.m. every second Wednesday! Clearly, with this rhythm, we exclude all people (students who parent, part-time students, students who work, etc.) who cannot give that much time to activist involvement. And yet, this becomes a vicious circle, where only the people who are available can be elected and where they burn out doing the work of ten!

Furthermore, we think that a “subcontracting” relationship could be created due to **a lack of autonomy on the part of the committees, as well as a form of executive control, mainly related to the right to an informal veto.** Let’s take the example of a statement written in solidarity with the Palestinian people in Gaza. This was an initiative of the social struggles committee who, over several hours on a Friday evening, drafted a letter of solidarity that was, among other things, a call-out for a support demonstration that Sunday. And, well, after going through all the phases of verification and approval, the letter and the call-out for the demonstration were only sent the Sunday morning, several hours before the demonstration. Therefore, the solidarity statement became a sort of “tool” serving ASSÉ’s image, rather than a mobilizing tool to rally activists and show support in the streets.

We must seriously pose the question: **Does the executive know the role and mandate of ASSÉ better than other committees? Or what the best strategy to follow is? What is ASSÉ, in the end? The executive? The national team? Students?** This is not an allegation but a reflection ... Do we really want such unequal relations in a volunteer activist organization?

We don’t want bosses. We want to organize together on equal footing.

Because we are against the commercialization of learning, we accord a great deal of importance to the fluidity and democratization of knowledge. We are far from suggesting that we claim the intellectual

property of the work done by members of the social struggles committee, but we want to state that we sometimes sensed a blatant lack of acknowledgment of our work.

For instance, when we brought forward the idea of participating in the global strike, we were rather coldly received by the rest of the Coordination Council and got the impression that our ideas were ridiculed by our peers. Despite everything, we went ahead with the mobilization (producing reflection texts and flyers, doing presentations at Congress, conducting workshops on anti-imperialism, etc.), which helped to create some excitement on the ground for the global strike. Following the interest shown by member associations, the ASSÉ Congress voted for a one-day strike, as well as for organizing a national demonstration on November 22, which was wildly successful.

We would have appreciated having more support for this project from the beginning ... and failing feeling supported, it would have been nice if our work had been acknowledged. This experience leaves us with the impression that when a person or a small group of individuals has an innovative and unexpected idea, they must “prove their worth” in adversity. But if said ideas meet with some success, it’s the whole organization that will gain political credit for the initiative.

If it’s good to question projects that might seem marginal, we must pay more attention not to marginalize the people who bring these ideas to the table. Without feeling the need to pat ourselves on the back interminably, it would be nice if the work carried out was explicitly acknowledged, as well as the challenges that had to be overcome.

POINTS FOR REFLECTION

- What thoughts do we have on inclusion, discrimination, privilege, and oppression at the heart of the national team? (A quick example: What happens when we want to affiliate anglophone student associations without having thought ahead of time about strategies of inclusion, such as bilingualism or simultaneous translation?)
- How can we avoid the phenomenon of “feeling above it all” that can arise by virtue of being on the national executive?
- How can we bring back questioning and open-mindedness? How can we prioritize looking critically at the internal workings of our organization?
- How can the corporatism surrounding organizing be avoided which is at the expense of involving activists with diverse origins and life circumstances?
- We must also reflect on the implications of one group of people having the right to veto the work of others, who also all provide free organizing and should have the same status as the executive members. We must reflect on the relationships of authority that we maintain at the heart of ASSÉ, so as to not reproduce relationships of patronage among us.
- What are we sacrificing in the name of institutionalizing ASSÉ, of legitimization from the media and the public? What energy could perhaps be better spent on focusing on internal relations, rather than on the image and credibility of ASSÉ?

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Transform the national executive into an “organization, coordination, meeting” or another type of committee, according to the main tasks, for the purposes of greater horizontality and equality. [For example, if the information committee functioned well and in an inclusive and egalitarian way (we don’t want to insinuate that this is not the case right now; we don’t know), we wouldn’t need a secretary of information on the executive to coordinate the work.]

- Ensure a rotation of people on the national team. Encourage the participation and inclusion of different people from a variety of backgrounds, while minimizing the presence of “*éminences grises*.”
- Provide training on oppression/power relations and on inclusion, privilege, and social struggles to student associations and, above all, to elected representatives on the national team.
- Add the idea of a welcome structure for newcomers to the national team, including gatherings, trainings, etc. Develop structures/processes wherein particular attention is paid to not reproducing power relations based on class, gender, and race.
- Adopt a notice of motion to create a permanent social struggles committee.
- Encourage the creation of safe space and, to do this, why not introduce mood minders at the COCOs? Choose the best meeting times, create strategies to ensure meetings are not as lengthy. At the beginning of meetings, create space to specify how we would like problems to be addressed, what our special needs are, etc., in order to be able to show we are more receptive, inclusive, and able to listen to criticism.
- Don’t be afraid of organizing mobilizations around more complex subjects and/or subjects that diverge somewhat from the national campaign. The struggle for the common good we are pursuing will not happen if we don’t, at the same time, pursue a lengthy educational process of reflection on different oppressions and systems of power that exist in the world. We think ASSÉ must put as much energy in promoting free tuition as in defending the fact that we don’t want free tuition if it doesn’t come with a radical change in the vision and content of education, as well as in society.

Thank you to everyone who has read until the end. It is because of all of these reflections that we have decided to resign. We are not slamming the door shut, we leave it ajar. We have been very reluctant to leave, as we are afraid that, in doing so, the criticisms we have raised will be swept under the rug, although we hope we are wrong. Nevertheless, at this time, these reflections and practices mean that we don’t feel we belong and we no longer want to organize in this space. We are, however, always open to collaboration and we will be ready to reconsider our involvement in ASSÉ in the future, as we still believe it could be a great organizing tool, for coordination and sharing of ideas, for experience and debate.

To you we say until the next time, because it’s only the beginning of the struggle. It has never stopped, and it will continue ...

In solidarity, with love and rage,

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Beatriz Munoz, CLS collaborator

Thank you to our collaborators and our re-readers, especially the women of the former women’s committee.

Published on ASSÉ’s orientation site: <http://orientation.bloquonslahausse.com/lettre-de-demission-du-comite-aux-luttes-sociales/> (now unavailable). See: <http://rushdia.virtualstack.com/resignation-letter-to-asse/>

(full PDF that contained this resignation letter can be found – p.18 – at: <http://www.asse-solidarite.qc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/cahier-des-memoires-versio-finale.pdf>)

