



Top union brass caught obstructing solidarity with Quebecois students [1]

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by Diane Kalen-Sukra.

I'm surprised it took so long for Canada's union bureaucracy to really feel the democratizing pressure of the social media Wikileaks internet age. It finally happened in a big way this week – Quebec and Canada's top union brass had "internal" correspondence, in which they direct all of Canada's major unions to put the brakes on solidarity with Quebec students (including the wide-spread social resistance to the [UN-condemned Quebec law \[2\]](#) criminalizing protest), leaked and posted by an [anonymous blogger \[3\]](#).

SO-SO-NOT SOLIDARITY

A quick summary of the leaked correspondence. On May 28th, the leader of the Quebec central labour body (FTQ), Michel Arsenault, issued a [letter \[4\]](#) to the leader of Canada's central labour body (CLC), Ken Georgetti in an effort to put a stop to efforts by "labour leaders in English Canada" who intend to "come and support the social conflict currently prevailing in Quebec".

It's useful to remember that this solidarity-killing letter was issued at the height of this longest and largest social protest in Canadian history, the precise moment when hundreds of thousands of Quebecois citizens were heading CLASSE's (the dominant student coalition) call to defy Law 78, imposed to break the popular movement by essentially criminalizing protest as it severely restricts the Charter-protected right to freedom of assembly. This was the time when many of the province's lawyers famously hit the streets in solidarity with the people, aware of Law 78's unconstitutionality and the danger it poses to our democracy.

Arsenault reasoned that the "situation in Quebec is currently very volatile" and expressed his continued intention to "ask for compliance" to this very same law the social movement in Quebec, and heart of the student strike (referred to by Arsenault as "radical wings") were defying. He writes that the "social strike" is not "THE strategy to be promoted for the moment," rather "the best approach is to facilitate a settlement instead of fuelling the fires".

In a peculiar final dump, Arsenault ends his letter blaming his rejection of English Canada's solidarity on the high tuition fees paid by students outside of Quebec. He writes, "if students in other provinces were paying less for their school tuitions, this would put less pressure on ours".

In bureaucratic-solidarity, the leader of the 3.3 million member weak workers' army in Canada, Ken Georgetti immediately forwards the letter to all union affiliates across the country with a cherry on top. In his cover [letter, \[5\]](#) Georgetti addressed head-on the "rumours" that some "national affiliates plan to organize potential illegal actions in Quebec in violation of Bill 78, to support the student protests."

So any union engaging in natural solidarity activity with the Quebecois are being made to sound like a 'criminal element' within the labour movement, engaging in "potential illegal actions", even though the struggle aims to defy an anti-democratic law that if left unchallenged, will be used to silence people, crush unions and break protest across the country. And what hope will students in English Canada have to end student debt slavery, if the Quebecois fail?

Georgetti reminds everyone of the "protocol" that exists between the two labour bodies, the FTQ & CLC, in essence ensuring that there will be no solidarity-activity going on between Quebec and Canadian unions and activists unless it is blessed and approved by this top union brass. It is called "respect" for the "Federation's jurisdiction". He ends by expressing his "hope that such rumours [of planned solidarity] are simply rumours and not fact."

There are those code-words of bureaucracy – not my "file", out of my "jurisdiction" -- used to justify all manner of betrayal and cowardice. These were the [same words used by the NDP \[6\]](#) to justify their failure to take a position on the Quebec student struggle, even though it was the Quebecois that in large part propelled the party to its federal official Opposition status.

Even the PQ (the center-left Quebecois sovereignty party) announced yesterday that it is going to [stop wearing the "red square" \[7\]](#)- the mark of support for the students – as it follows polls, hedges its bets and gears up to take on the governing Liberals pumelled by its attack on the students and basic democratic rights.

What ever happened to standing or falling for what is right, for what you believe in? Who isn't sick of "leaders" who will sell out their mother, brother or sister if it will buy them votes? "Leaders" who ignore the dire need for the power of a people's movement to push through deep political reform, in favour of simply getting elected?

Judging by the frustrated "where are the union members?" comments of many on-the-ground Casserole Nights in Canada organizers, who are coordinating solidarity actions across the country, and the silence regarding solidarity with the Quebecois students on English Canada union websites, it seems the FTQ/CLC letters had their intended chilling effect.

The leader of the Ontario Teachers Federation (OSSTF) Ken Coran, seemingly eager not to be identified as one of those rumoured English unions "planing to organize potential illegal actions", issued a [letter \[8\]](#) to its local leadership, with the CLC & FTQ letters attached, "recommending that there be no official support or donation made to the Quebec student unions." Cold as ice.

MEMBER BLOWBACK

The online and social media response yesterday was quick and damning. Many expressed shock and dismay at the anti-democratic arrogance of the union brass combined with the sense of betrayal inherent in the call to stand-down, when the Quebec students were calling for increased solidarity and support. The question "which side are you on?" is being repeatedly asked of the parties involved.

Fuel was added to the fire when the CLC, through a communications staffer, issued a response defending their "protocol", calling for the blog posting with the "private correspondence" to be removed and accusing it's author of "potentially libelous" comments regarding CLC President Ken Georgetti.

Having spent time as a communications scribe for the labour movement, I tried to have sympathy for the communications "brother", who was being personally reprimanded in online commentary. But you've got to draw the line somewhere, even if it means breaking the golden-handcuffs, and that line is being drawn by courageous people everywhere [See: [CUPE Ontario June 21st statement \[9\]](#) reaffirming their support of and solidarity with the Quebecois students]. Justice requires it, the times demand it.

It begins by defining who "the team" is. In a member-driven organization, it's the membership. And each and every person paid by the workers to represent them has an obligation first to act and speak on their behalf. Without humble servitude and committed loyalty to the membership, the relationship between union staffers and union members is purely parasitic. One lives literally, off the other.

How many union members know that behind the face of a handful of public union leaders there are thousands of staffers, lawyers, researchers, and in some offices enough communications people to rival our largest news stations?

It is through these staffers, and the control of union funds over locals, consultants, social justice groups, think tanks, legal firms and alternative media outlets, that the union bureaucracies wield their control over the workers' movement. Orders are issued -- "isolate that fighter", "kill that campaign", "purge that victory" -- and everyone blindly follows, or else...

It is in this way that fighters are turned into vegetables, or worse, career-driven wheel spinners, and people of passion and conscience are broken into shadows of themselves. If they stick around and stop fighting, they lose their soul and resort to passing their days reminding members how busy they are (marching backwards), counting air miles from their latest junket and using social media to glorify their privileged lifestyle (compliments of members' dues) rather than use it as a powerful medium to educate, empower and organize.

Rather than feel the pain of their members -- the eroding wages, lack of dignity at work, and loss of all security -- such union bureaucrats cling ever more tightly to their positions, their privileges and perks. Any challenge to the status quo, is a threat to this parasitic existence, even if it means turning a blind eye to gross injustice.

Controlling union staffers was more difficult in the days when most were recruited from the ranks, specially selected because of the way in which they had distinguished themselves as competent fighters with perseverance, integrity and their ability to persuade people to stand up for justice. But today, like all organizations in decline, our union bureaucracies shamelessly champion blind-allegiance over principled leadership, nepotism over merit, and power over justice, even if it comes with gross incompetence and does a disservice to the membership.

The pitfalls of bureaucracy plague the history of the workers' movement and must be confronted. Most extreme is the example of Stalin. When he was preparing the grounds to expel and kill the dozens of revolutionary leaders (his "threats") who had actually brought down the monarchy, led the Bolsheviks to power and were loved by the people, he first flooded by the thousands the workers' organizations, including key positions of responsibility, with inexperienced and often opportunistic people, who by the time they got over the nice feeling of having a big-title, handsome paycheck and fancy outfit to boot, the dirty deeds were done, history was rewritten, and the doomed course of a nation and revolution was determined.

It's no secret that today's union bureaucracies are not sufficiently transparent or democratic. With too few exceptions, Convention debates are prescribed and anyone "out of line", faces the cold isolation of the monolithic bureaucratic back-turn. Staffers that are "out of line" have their number-punched and a merciless hatchet-team is unleashed, violating every conceivable union-principle, to mob them out of the organization, out of their employment and against the will and best interests of the membership. All sins are simply washed away with reminders of the movement's past accomplishments (like the 8 hour work day, eroded beyond recognition today), and the unquestioned nobility of our overall cause.

The CLC's heavy-handed "how dare you question us?" response, in this case, proves how unaccustomed the union brass are to being held to account. They actually think that correspondence calling on unions everywhere to potentially betray the Quebecois movement, what Chris Hedges refers to as the "Northern light..the most important resistance movement in the industrialized world", can and should be considered "private". Where in the CLC Constitution does it say that the union is to be organized as an aristocracy and not a democracy? Nowhere.

I'm with the anonymous blogger that the CLC communications staffer tried to dismiss as a "self-appointed pundit who posts to blogs": "Let's be clear, union leaders work for union members. They are not at the top of a chain of command and if the leadership want to use the unions as a tool to obstruct solidarity instead of facilitate it then the leadership should be ignored or discarded. The CLASSE did this through their mass assemblies and so can we."

The time to [Occupy your union bureaucracy \[10\]](#) is now. Our collective future depends on it.

WE ARE ALL QUEBECOIS. Debt slaves of the world unite! (B.Y.O.P) [11]

Diane Kalen-Sukra is a repeat survivor of internal union purges and is currently waiting for member- reinforcements to ignite and occupy Canada's labour bureaucracy, of which she is a part. Over the past 20 years, she has coordinated and led countless successful community and labour campaigns, most recently, the Water Watch Mission-Abbotsford campaign which defeated the largest proposed water privatization scheme in Canada's water sector.

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[1] Top union brass caught obstructing solidarity with Quebecois students

[http:// bit.ly/OfZQQI](http://bit.ly/OfZQQI)

[2] UN-condemned Quebec law

<http://www.vancouversun.com/news/Quebec+students+cheered+criticism+Bill+human+rights+agency/6805149/story.htm>

[3] anonymous blogger

<http://recomposition.info/2012/06/20/c-l-c-sells-out-students/>

[4] Michel Arsenault letter

"<http://zinelibrary.info/files/FTQ-Students-2012-05-28-EN-1.pdf>

[5] Ken Georgetti letter

<http://zinelibrary.info/files/FTQ-Protocol-2012-05-28-EN.pdf>

[6] same words used by the NDP

<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/quebec-student-struggle-poses-a-challenge-for-ndp/article2441782/>

[7] stop wearing the "red square"

<http://www2.macleans.ca/2012/06/21/the-pqs-disappearing-red-square/>

[8] Ken Coran letter

<http://zinelibrary.info/files/167-quebec%20student%20protests.pdf>

[9] CUPE Ontario June 21st statement

<http://www.cupe.on.ca/d1946/solidarity-quebec-student-movement>

[10] Occupy your union bureaucracy

<http://therealnews.com/t2/component/content/article/129-more-blog-posts-from-diane-kalen-sukra/1029-occupy-your-union-bureaucracy-an-insiders-cal>

[11] WE ARE ALL QUEBECOIS. Debt slaves of the world unite! (B.Y.O.P)

<http://therealnews.com/t2/component/content/article/129-more-blog-posts-from-diane-kalen-sukra/1041-we-are-all-quebecois-even-if-we-dont-know-it-yet>

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