

Austerity Threatens our Rights and our Funding
Let's Fight Austerity!



MÉPACQ guide on the community sector strike against austerity
Fall 2015

mepacq



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Who are we?

Founded in 1981, le Mouvement d'éducation populaire et d'action communautaire du Québec* (MÉPACQ) brings together 11 local coalitions for popular education which, in turn, represent more than 300 community groups across Québec. We use popular education as a tool for social transformation, social justice, and solidarity in our society.

* The Quebec Movement for Popular Education and Community Action

What is this about?

Austerity measures are having deep and unequal impacts on all social, political, and economic levels, including putting community groups across the province in increasingly precarious and uncertain positions. For this reason, MÉPACQ has been given a mandate to mobilize the community sector towards a general strike against austerity and for the continued independence, recognition, and funding of community groups. This guide is part of that effort.

As such, MÉPACQ is consulting with its group members, and will call upon its allies to obtain a strike mandate for **November 2nd or 3rd, ideally of a week long**, in order to maximize the potential for a general strike.

MÉPACQ will also respond to every call for consultation on the strike against austerity.

In supporting this work, this guide tries to answer many of the concerns expressed by community groups about the strike. You may not agree with it all! Our goal is to generate a conversation and debate, because we believe strikes are an important tactic. Enjoy!



A General Strike Against Austerity: Yes, it's possible!

Starting a general strike is not easy. Yet, on May 1st of last year, we had what was close to being the first general strike in decades.

On this historic day, an unprecedented 850 trade union organizations, students and community organizations were on strike against austerity! Of these, 160 MÉPACQ member organizations participated, which represents more than a third of our network. Of the 11 regional coalitions, 9 were on strike, as well as one auxiliary member.

Between the May 1st strike, and the 225-minute closing of all health and social service organizations in 2014, the community sector has demonstrated, more than ever, their ability for large-scale mobilization in defense of their own funding and in the fight against austerity.

One or two days of a community sector strike, however, will not solve the problems we face in terms of underfunding, government recognition, or austerity measures.

Only a larger movement can generate change in what has been 30 years of successive neoliberal governments. To win, we need the solidarity and mobilization of all sectors .



Only a larger social movement can generate change in the neoliberal orientation of more than 30 years of successive governments. In one way or another, we need all sectors to mobilize in solidarity to win.

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What is a strike?

Refusing Oppression

Striking is refusing to accept the violation of our fundamental rights. It's refusing to accept degrading conditions of life for women and the poor. It's refusing to accept the general impoverishment of the population and of our organizations. It's refusing to accept austerity.

A stop in regular activities

For workers, this means stopping work. For students, it means stopping class. For community organizations, it means stopping services and planned activities.

Collective action

Going on strike means stopping our regular activities to entirely devote ourselves to organizing collective action, and to mobilizing our members, our allies, and the public.

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What is a General Strike?

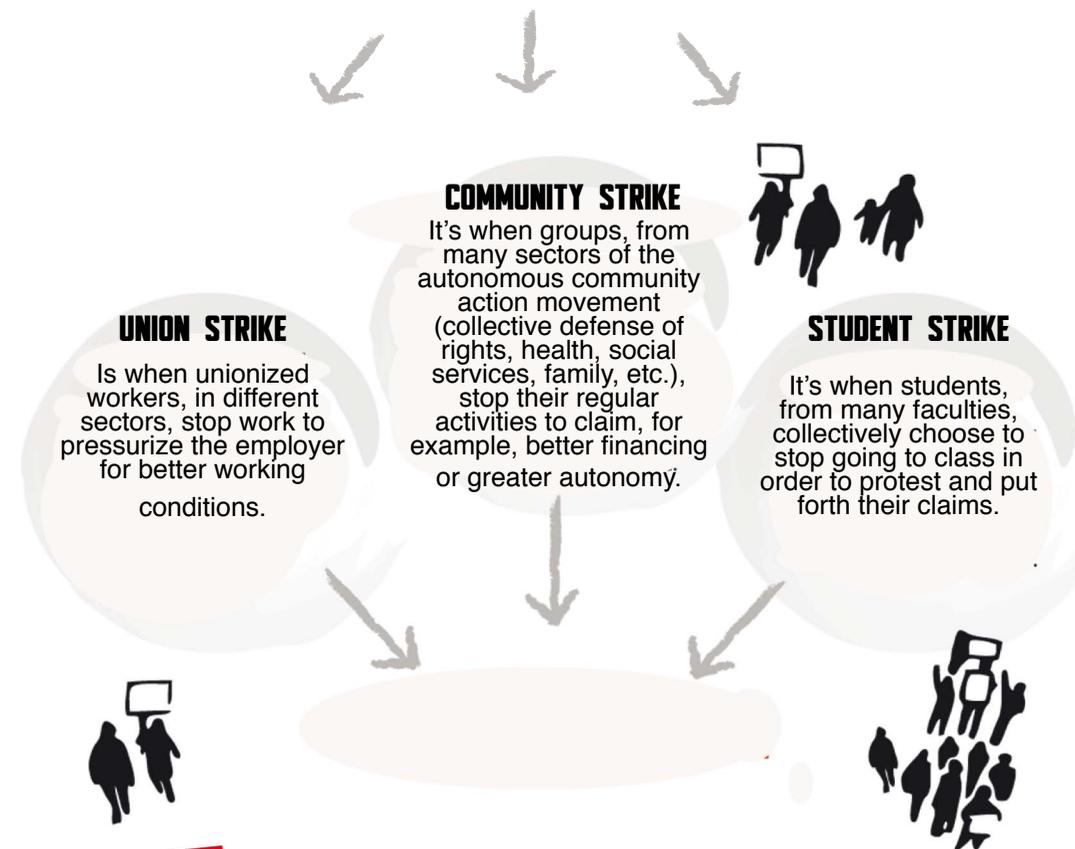
Focuses on broad social issues

A general strike highlights issues that go beyond industry or region-specific demands, that concern instead the population's quality of life and the respect of people's fundamental rights.

Mobilizes many sectors of society

A general strike is only so because of the coalition between the community, students, public and private sector workers, who ensure the demands cut across all levels of society.

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ATTENTION!



Even if the issue of a general strike is larger than any individual union or industry, it is a means for everyone involved to push forward their own demands.

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A community sector strike against austerity measures?



A community sector strike against austerity is for:

- The community sector to take the initiative to strike in order to build a general strike against austerity
- The community sector to include its own demands in a general strike against austerity.

The community sector sometimes has a tendency to wait for calls for a strike from other social movements, in particular trade unions. However, the unions can only decide for themselves. If the community sector doesn't take its own initiatives, it risks not being ready when a united social movement emerges again. For example, the 2012 student strike was a strong moment of social mobilization in Quebec to which the community sector contributed little.

The community sector has to take its own strike initiatives without waiting for the decisions of other social movements (unions, student milieu). Indeed, the community sector can itself have a positive influence on other sectors of society, encouraging them to strike in turn. The community sector can act as an important player in the building of a general anti-austerity movement.

So, how does it work exactly?

In our messaging and our demands, we must:

- **Link austerity to the community sector's right to funding**
- **Link the community sector's funding issues to the general strike against austerity**

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Why strike against austerity?

Because austerity attacks our social safety net!

- Austerity attacks public services and social programs.
- Austerity attacks the fundamental rights of the majority of the population: right to healthcare, to a decent wage, to education, housing, food, etc.
- Austerity attacks the quality of life of women and the poor

Because austerity attacks community groups!

- Austerity directly attacks the financing of community organizations.
- Austerity attacks the rights of the people that we support. The more rights that are attacked, then the greater the need to defend them and, thus, more financing for our organizations is required.
- The community movement is a large link in the social safety net, and it is attacked harshly by the austerity measures.

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The fight against austerity and the fight for community sector demands is the same fight!

The community sector is an integral part of the Quebec social model, in the same way that public services and social programs are. We represent the collective ways in which we equip ourselves to improve our quality of life, work, studies, etc. We must fight austerity to improve our communities. Currently, the neoliberal government has no reason to increase our funding. This is primarily because we are autonomous and resist a utilitarian view of the community sector as a way to compensate for the withdrawal of the State from the provision of universal social services. It is also because we are seen as masters of the art of doing more with less.

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What are our demands?

1 Maintaining and improving our social safety net

We demand the end of austerity measures, as well as the renewal and improvement of the social safety net made up of public services, social programs, and the entirety of the community sector.

2 Improved distribution of wealth

We demand the continuation and improvement of progressive taxation, favouring greater contributions from people who make the most and large businesses, in order to better finance public services, social programs and the community sector, and to assure greater social justice overall.

3 Commitments to the community sector

We demand full funding, recognition and independence for community groups.

Can we discuss our demands in the general strike?



If the community sector doesn't talk about the attacks we are undergoing and defend our own demands, who will?

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Why a strike and not other forms of mobilization?

In the space of a few months, austerity measures have destroyed the social achievements obtained over the course of decades of struggle. Despite all attempts to mobilize and convince the government to back down, they continue to side with big business and the rich. Trying to convince them otherwise, in a context where the state has ended any dialogue with community groups, will not get us very far. It is now necessary to intensify our strategies, using tactics of pressure, assertion and disruption.

To Shift the Balance of Power



The strike is one step in an escalation of tactics wherein we build our strength to face the State. It represents a strong symbol marking a rupture, a breach of trust between the community and the government. It means our rejection of austerity, our refusal to continue to offer our services in conditions of general impoverishment of the population and our organizations.

Strikes are also a way to:

- To send a strong message to the government
- To give ourselves time to advance our demands
- To find solidarity amongst ourselves and our allies in other social movements.
- To reach the public
- To begin a collective conversation on the society we want to build.



What to do on the day of the strike?

Suspending regular activities doesn't mean closing the premises, but rather to use the organization's resources and working hours to focus entirely on the collective struggle.

During a strike, my group can:

- Organize or participate in events or demonstrations.
- Organize or participate in actions that disrupt or make a scene.
- Organize or participate in symbolic picket lines.
- Organize awareness activities.
- Organise autonomous popular education activities.
- Give access to our premises to militant movements or citizen initiatives that have fewer resources.

What if we offer essential services?

You can participate in something other than the strike by organizing to give support, by offering alternative services or changing the time of the strike. For example:

- A soup kitchen could offer meals in the street or in front of the deputy's office while distributing information about the strike.
- Suspend services for a few hours
- Hand-out flyers or other resources while you offer your service



Every plan, every action, every demonstration, every day or moment of the strike is one more step towards creating a strike movement strong enough to defeat austerity measures.



Will we be paid during the strike?

Yes. If it's a decision of one of your decision-making bodies (members, board of directors) and you participate or organize activities during the strike. It's a service strike, not a work strike.

No. If you strike against your employer in the hopes of gaining better working conditions.

No. If the employees of the organization decide to strike against the wishes of members or the board of directors.



Will my organization lose its government funding, if it goes on strike?

In principle, no. During the service strike, the organization doesn't close its doors; it endorses the social transformation mission of the ACA (L'Action communautaire autonome) and mobilizes to that end.

In reality, it depends. The stronger the strike, the more groups that strike, then the more the State will be powerless to exercise reprisals. Be strong! Stay united!



What do we have to lose?

Our financing is already threatened by the austerity measures. If the government has decided to cut funding, then whether or not we participate in a social strike will not figure into the balance.

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How long will the strike last?

The strike would last for two days: November 2nd and 3rd. However, there could be other advantageous periods to hold a community strike, in order to participate in a larger, general strike. For example, the public sector unions, currently in negotiations, are preparing for the possibility of defying a special law and to expand their claims to the broader issues of austerity starting this fall. To do this, they will need the support of all the social movements. Will community groups be ready?

Prolonging or renewing a strike mandate

Whatever length you have determined with your members, we recommend that you agree beforehand upon a democratic mechanism to prolong or renew your strike mandate. There are many mechanisms:

- A mandate with a fixed duration (one or many days, a week, one day per month, etc.) without renewal
- A mandate whose duration is renewable (e.g. one week)
- A mandate with an unlimited duration

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What is an unlimited strike?

The strike has begun without a predetermined end, and will end when the members decide. This situation requires regular meetings of the decision-making bodies in order to decide if the strike continues and what direction it takes.

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What is the threshold to strike?

It takes a minimum number of members or organizations to start a strike. When this minimum threshold is reached, the strike can start. How many national groups, unions, or student associations need to have a mandate to strike, before your organization joins the general strike? It's up to you to decide!

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How does consultation work?

Who do I need to consult?

Whether it is your Board of Directors, your Staff, or your members who decide to strike is up to you, in keeping with your organizational culture and guidelines.

How do we consult?

There are different way to consult about a strike mandate:

- Organize a public information night and discussion
- Organize a special general assembly for your members
- Organize lunch meetings with your members
- Organize to discuss the point during one or many board of directors' meetings or during your general assemblies
- Organise training on strikes followed by a meeting to make a decision
- For coalitions or sectorial groups, meet with your member groups or the boards of directors of your member groups

What are we consulting about?

The basic question you are asking is: Do we want to participate in the movement for a general strike against austerity? If yes, what are the conditions of our participation?

- How long will our strike be?
- The date and time of the strike.
- The activities we wish to do during the strike
- What criteria must be met to begin our strike?
- The process of renewing the mandate to strike

MÉPACQ's Consultation

Currently, many movements are preparing themselves for the strike:

- Community groups are preparing for a strike/closing on November 2nd and 3rd.
- The public sector unions are preparing to defy an eventual special law.
- Last spring, the student milieu announced that it would come out in force this fall.

For the moment, two consultations are in process. We encourage you to discuss this amongst your members and decision-making bodies in the manner you choose.

1) The community sector strike on November 2nd and 3rd

These two strike/closing days are a joint initiative of the campaign “Je tiens à ma communauté, je soutiens le communautaire” («I care about my community, I support the community sector»)*and the Regroupement des organismes en défense collective des droits (RODCD, the Coalition of Rights-Based Organisations) . This strike focusses primarily on the claims of the community sector while also making the link with the fight against austerity.

- Do we want to participate in the community strike on November 2nd and 3rd?
- What activities will we do within this strike period?
- With whom will we organize or participate in actions?

Why consult? Why not wait for a call from national groups?

A widespread solidarity movement starts from the grassroots, never from national representatives. If the grassroots don't get involved, and if there's no room for a democratic debate, then it's not possible to start a movement!

2) A week long strike against austerity, to be launched at an opportune moment

In the event of a new general strike movement appearing, MÉPACQ proposes that you have a week's mandate for a community strike already in place, so it can be used when the opportune moment presents itself. The objectives of this strike mandate are to contribute to building a general strike against austerity and to be ready to rapidly respond to an eventual call to strike from our allies.

- Do we have a mandate of a week's length in place to be used when the time is right?
- What conditions need to be met in order to trigger this strike for our organization?

NOTE : The «Coalition Main Rouge» is in the process of consulting it's members about a general strike this fall (exact dates to be determined) and is also probing the interest of groups in participating in economic disruptions or a provincial demonstration during the strike.

The Strike Threshold for MÉPACQ

The MÉPACQ will begin their participation in a general strike movement against austerity and for a redistribution of wealth (including the demands of the community sector), if the following criteria are met:

- That at least 10 coalitions and national organization (community sector, feminist, environmental, etc) have decided to go on strike
- That at least 2 provincial unions or unions with a national reach, totalling a minimum of 10,000 members, or local unions totalling a minimum of 10,000 members, have gone on strike
- That at least one provincial student association has decided to go on strike
- That at least 50% + 1 of the regional coalitions of the MÉPACQ have a strike mandate

Tables régionales d'éducation populaire

Do you want to consult your members of your board of directors on the community sector strike? Do you need support, tools, or information to hold your own consultation? Do you want a training or a facilitated discussion on the strike or on austerity? Contact MÉPACQ or one of the regional coalitions for popular education!

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