



# Another Quebec is Marching!

## Afterthoughts on the Quebec Social Forum

Gabrielle Gérin

The Quebec Social Forum (QSF), which took place in Montreal at the end of August 2007, was the first event of this type organized in the province, and arguably one of the largest reunions of the left in Quebec history. After having provided an overview of the event, its organizational process and particularities, I will present my view on the impacts it may well have had on social movements and the left in Quebec, and on the pertinence of creating spaces such as the QSF in the current socio-political context.

### A Quantitative and Qualitative Success

Quantitatively and qualitatively, the event went far beyond the expectations of most. Over 5,000 persons participated in the workshops, conferences and artistic demonstrations programmed – 2,000 more than anticipated by the organizers. The diversity of participants was quite striking not only in geographic and generational terms, but also in terms of the various interests that brought them to the Forum. In addition to the large variety of dedicated activists from every social movement, generation and region of Quebec, there also were a great number of “simple citizens” interested in gathering information and exploring ways to contribute to social change.

The number and diversity of organizations involved in the event made the QSF a historically unique event for the left in Quebec. They were all there – or almost all: feminists, unions (with the notable exception of the FTQ [Fédération des travailleurs et travailleuses du Québec] leadership), students, ecologists, socialists, various rights defence groups, community organizations

and the indigenous movement. Quebec Solidaire also actively mobilized its members to participate in the event, though it was based on a non-partisan principle.

This diversity was also expressed in the richness of the content of the QSF program. With 320 workshops and conferences to attend within two days of activities, most participants were often forced to make hard choices. Rooms were generally full – or packed! – and the audience participated actively in the discussions. Some workshops witnessed interesting dynamics develop, where hierarchies were put into question, and genuine determination and solidarity were expressed “from below”. For example, during a panel on solidarity between the student and trade-union movements, members of the audience (often trade-union members) vehemently and unanimously condemned the two trade-union leaders on the panel (Claudette Carbonneau from the CSN (Confédération des syndicats nationaux) and Henry Massé from the FTQ) for having been so condescending and reluctant to show pro-active solidarity with the student movement in 2005, and even pressed them to follow the students’ leadership in contesting neoliberalism.

This combination of experiences and ideas in an open and non-hierarchical space produced surprisingly energetic exchanges, and a strong sense of unity through diversity and action. The necessity to organize combatively and on a broad range of issues in response to conservative and neoliberal onslaughts, and the possibility of doing so collectively and effectively were palpable during the event, owing in great part to the quantity and diversity of participants present. →

## The Assembly of Social Movements (ASM)

The Assembly of Social Movements (ASM) was the closing event of the Forum. It was organized by a group of organizations, under the coordination of the Fédération des Femmes du Québec (FFQ), and was also a first in the history of the left in Quebec.

A feminist marching band opened the assembly, and brought the roughly 500 persons present to their feet, chanting “Contre le capitalisme, je me lève et je résiste! Contre le patriarcat, je me lève et je me bats!” with their fists in the air... a rather surreal sight! This was followed by the reading of the “Social movements’ solidarity call”, a considerably radical and determined text paying tribute to the various struggles against neoliberalism and oppression in Quebec and throughout the world, and calling them to unity and determined collective action. The declaration was received by a long-standing ovation, and over 150 organizations had added their signatures to the text by the end of September. The proposition to undertake coordinated actions all across Quebec at the end of January 2008 (a response to the call for worldwide mobilization sent by the World Social Forum (WSF) organizing committee) was also well received – the common denominator of these actions being the lighting of fires, in order to put light on the various struggles being fought “in the long and cold Quebecois winter”.

There were over a hundred interventions from the floor during the ASM – most were calls for solidarity on the part of other movements for struggles that are coming up in the short term: the student struggle against the raise in tuition-fees, the imminent campaign against poverty led by the Coalition pour un Québec sans pauvreté, the struggle against the privatization of health services, the campaign for the right to unionization for migrant agricultural workers, the struggle against Canadian mining companies’ activities inside and outside Canada, the on-going indigenous struggle and others. Many interventions called for more openness on the part of institutionalized social movements to new activists, and for more inclusive and accessible language and organizations.

Louis Roy, first vice-president at the CSN, made a strong call to restoring and building unity within the trade-union movement.

The ASM was a singular mix between organizations of all sizes and milieus and activists of all kinds. The mood was resolutely set on solidarity between movements, unity through action and renewed activity in struggling against neoliberalism and oppression. This was greatly enriched by the fact that this was a rather “informal” assembly – more like a plenary – open to all movements and activists: exchanges and language were not restricted by heavy procedures or the constraints of coalitional decision-making. It felt like walls were breaking apart between activists, as determination and solidarity were being built up. The experience was so interesting that many are thinking of holding semi-regular ASMs in the future. The ASM showed the importance and the potential for creating a political organization that can offer an open meeting space for activists from all social movements.

## Organizational Process

The “Initiative towards a QSF” was founded in 2005, in the months following the Porto Alegre 5th World Social Forum, by a group of activists, mostly students, on an individual basis. Its goal was to initiate a process that would lead to the organization of a Quebec Social Forum, while putting strong emphasis on regional participation and on the horizontal, democratic and inclusive character of the process – one that would also be led by autonomous activists dedicated to the project rather than solely by organizations with heavy institutional interests.

After months and months of hard work, a date and site that seemed to content a great number of organizations and activists were decided upon by the general assembly. From then on, the list of organizations and activists supporting the QSF and involved in its organization kept increasing, while the same core of activists who had founded the Initiative still coordinated the process.



Though the continuing neoliberal offensive calls for collective solutions, social movements in most places have found it difficult to overcome the counter-pressures of their institutional interests and competing perspectives. In such a context, the weakness, fragmentation, and institutionalization of social movements in Quebec made the organization of an open and inclusive social forum a challenging task. Activists involved in the organization of the QSF had to cope with the complications provoked by the significant differences and contradictions between the practices, priorities and principles of the various sectors of social movements in Quebec: the challenge was to find solutions that could regroup a large variety of actors, attenuate divisions and create consensus and collaboration in spite of these differences. In my view, the QSF organizers were able, for this first forum, to overcome most of the fragmenting obstacles they were faced with. This can be partly explained by a political will on the part of the various leaderships of the social movements to gravitate towards finding collective ways to face the ongoing neoliberal and conservative onslaught. But the key to the QSF's success in grouping such a great diversity of organizations and activists together was probably the "neutral" and dynamic role played by the core of activists that coordinated the process in developing solutions and principles that would create consensus, within an organizational process that didn't force organizations to work in "coalition" but rather in an autonomous way around a collective project.

### Impacts of the QSF

The QSF was organizationally successful – but will it have real, profound impacts on social struggles against neoliberalism and oppression in Quebec? The WSF is often criticized on the basis that it is not a space for the formal coordination of social struggles: the critics argue that tangible results therefore don't flow out of it and that its impact can only be limited and vague, forums merely acting as a shallow, pat-in-the-back type of "festivals of resistance." These critiques – and others – are usually rapidly applied to all other social forums, whatever their scale and organizational process.

It is my argument that national/local social forums contribute significantly to addressing certain problems that have been paralyzing social struggles in the occidental world today, namely: the over-institutionalization, parcellization and non-political character of social movements, their lack of democracy and inclusiveness, restraining the development of dynamic self-activity "from below" and the more general sense of powerlessness and resignation induced by the ideological and socio-political domination of the right and rising conservatism.

In Quebec, we must add to this portrait the fact that the very dynamic, recent anti-globalization struggles, student strike, various community mobilizations against environmentally and socially destructive economic development projects, anti-war and other mobilizations have formed a whole new array of activists with no fixed institutional affiliation, but genuine interest in contributing to social change. In such a context, there was an urgent need to create spaces designed to redefine, enlarge, democratize, unite and bring dynamism to the left, from below.

The QSF aimed to act as such a space: its organizational process was a regionally decentralized, horizontal and open one, involving hundreds of activists and organizations. In its various assemblies, committees and regional collectives, important solidarity networks were built between groups of all sizes and sectors and activists who worked together around a common objective: in this sense, the mere organizational process of the QSF will have lasting impacts on the consolidation of a renewed left in Quebec.

While WSFs are accessible only to the privileged few who can leave home and work for a week and afford a short trip to another continent, a provincial social forum does not pose the same problem or, if it does, it's on a much smaller scale as additional measures were taken so that the event would be accessible to groups and people with limited means or who lived in distant parts of Quebec. This allowed for massive and diverse popular and organizational participation.

Participants in the QSF experienced a horizontal, participative and inclusive space. Not only was the programming process a participative one (activities were auto-programmed in advance by organizations and individuals), but so was the form of the workshops and sessions, meant to break with the traditional verticality of public events. In this sense, the QSF contributed to generating democratic and participative culture, practices and structures within social movements in Quebec. Moreover, the QSF gave its participants the opportunity to gather an incredible amount of information, to exchange experiences and analysis with other activists and to build solidarities and perspectives for common actions – hence consolidating social movements from below.

A particularity of the QSF was its thoroughly political character – by allowing various sectors and struggles to meet and exchange through their base and on a massive scale, the QSF not only helped those in attendance develop a more global understanding of social issues and struggles, but also generated a strong sense of unity, consciousness and political confidence. The QSF could be said to have reinforced all the facets of class consciousness in its participants: the consciousness of "us" (who we are, what unites us), "they" (who/what do we oppose), of the "alternative" (what do we want to build) and of the "how" (what strategy should be undertaken).

We must finally keep in mind that this was the first QSF: its success certainly will put that event on the map for Quebec activists in the future. The potential of this space will only be fully developed in forums and struggles to come, as organizations and persons prepare more thoroughly in order to make the most out of the event – one where the seeds of a dynamic and democratic mass political movement are planted and cultivated – and meanwhile engage in the social movement building, struggles and political activity necessary to complete this process. **R**

Gabrielle Gérin is a Masters student in Political Science at York University. She was a founding member of the "Initiative towards a QSF" and has been at the core of the organizational process of the Quebec Social Forum for the past 3 years.