

The next key date: March 21, 2015

**En route
vers les États
généraux de
l'enseignement
supérieur**



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Education Committee

As you probably remember, FNEEQ adopted this recommendation shortly after the Summit on Higher Education. That vast consultation organized by the PQ government had, in the opinion of FNEEQ Federal Council delegates, left a number of major problems hanging and avoided the central issue raised by the student strike and spring movement (“printemps érable”), namely the validity of charging fees for post-secondary education. “Indexing tuition is a form of freeze,” argued Pauline Marois, sweeping the issue of free tuition under the rug.

Eighteen months later, the political landscape has evolved from avoiding issues to trial balloon attacks! “Mr. Couillard’s government has floated so many trial balloons in public opinion that the scene could be confused with a kid’s birthday party,” Simon Tremblay-Pepin, researcher at the *Institut de recherche et d’informations socio-économiques* (IRIS), wrote recently. The string on all the balloons? An obsession with austerity, the new Trojan horse of the “government reengineering” that Jean Charest used to dream about. Calls are already being heard on all sides for a 2015 spring movement to “burst the balloons.”

In May 2013, *Université de Montréal* professor Michel Seymour gave a presentation at the FNEEQ Federal Council meeting arguing for free tuition. In passing, he threw out an idea: had the time come for Estates General on Higher Education in Quebec? The Federal Council was so taken with the idea that the next day it recommended “FNEEQ take the initiative of organizing Estates General on Higher Education.” An ad hoc committee was struck in spring 2014 to follow through on this recommendation.

The Estates General proposal

In this new context of austerity, the proposal for Estates General on Higher Education is more relevant than ever. Quebec society needs to look to its future in a way that breaks with neo-liberal despondency and fear-mongering. The spirit of the resolution passed in May 2013 is a call to mobilize progressive forces – in education first and then in Quebec society as a whole – around a liberating vision of higher education. This vision must be grounded in the idea that education is a lifelong right, from cradle to grave, and that exercising this right helps make society free, democratic, egalitarian and happy. It is a right that cannot be separated from other human rights. Thus, the process leading up to the Estates General can only be enriched by joining the ranks of those who resist the austerity that is eroding our rights in general – rights to a decent standard of living, to health, to housing, to pensions, to equality and to democratic life.

It is also true that organizing real Estates General takes more than a few months. It takes time to mobilize allies, prepare a general overview of the question, open up spaces for sharing and discussion, draft resolutions for change and submit them for discussion so that the entire process is truly democratic, based on genuine grassroots participation by teachers and professionals in education.

A night of higher education to launch a coalition of progressive forces

An important step towards the Estates General will be taken on March 21, 2015. FNEEQ invites unions, student associations, citizens’ groups and community organizations working in the field of higher education in Quebec to come together in Montréal to create a progressive coalition whose first mandate will be to hold the Estates General. In the longer run, however, such a coalition will help build the position of strength needed to defend the vision of education that comes out of the Estates General. The coalition will be launched with a “night of higher education” on the first day of spring, on the eve of March 22, a symbolic date harking back to the student uprising. There is good reason to think that by then we will find ourselves caught up in strong mobilization by labour and social movements. We want this fledgling coalition to take advantage of that energy.

**For the right to education!
For a progressive coalition in
higher education!
Towards Estates General on
Higher Education!**

Mark this important event on your calendar. Your union will soon receive a letter of invitation to participate in this event, which will mark without any doubt the start of a new spring. ■