

A look back at the 2016 World Social Forum and ahead to the *États généraux de l'enseignement supérieur*

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The 2016 World Social Forum held in Montréal last August made history as the first-ever edition to take place in the global North. While staging the Forum this side of the North-South divide may not have been the subject of unanimity, this gathering nonetheless demonstrated that, in the face of the global crisis affecting all humanity, solution bearers from every continent need to come together to take collective action.



Education Space at the FSM

On January 20, 2016, FNEEQ began meeting with its many education partners in Québec to lay the groundwork for what would ultimately become the Education Space of the Montréal World Social Forum.¹

Our intention was to bring together not only organizations representing the other levels of education, but also student associations and adult and grassroots education groups.

Each organization was to propose topics and eventually organize a workshop. An information-sharing process was then put in place to pool connected or related topics in the aim of developing a rich, representative and varied programme of events.

The result was a week of activities on education—from early childhood through to university and continuing education—that was both fruitful and well attended. Indeed, even though other workshops were going on at the same time, the rooms were always filled to capacity. This was supported by the presence of international guest speakers and of representatives of Education International (EI)—another first for a World Forum—who took part in two workshops, one on philanthrocapitalism and the other on university privatization.

The plethora of workshops on offer—1,500 in total—may have caused some dilemmas in terms of which ones to attend, but it also demonstrated the great many issues and challenges that participating organizations and individuals wanted to bring to the table.

In short, the WSF Education Space gave rise to a wealth of productive and engaging discussions that follow on the heels of the Peoples' Social Forum held in Ottawa in 2014. Based on our synthesis of these discussions, it seems clear that those advocating for open, accessible and free education have succeeded in consolidating their causes for greater cohesiveness of action.

États généraux de l'enseignement supérieur in Québec²

Members of the higher education community have long been calling for the organization of a major assembly to let the government know what they would like to see and how they envision the future for Québec's colleges and universities. During the WSF, a workshop was dedicated to bringing education stakeholders together in the goal of furthering the project for *États généraux de l'enseignement supérieur* in Québec (ÉGES).

The “mandate” for this project dates back to 2013, following the Summit on Higher Education organized by the then Parti Québécois government. That Summit led to the creation of five major task forces which, for the most part, did not address the key demands from 2012,



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1 See FNEEQ's Carnet FSM, published fall 2016, <http://fneeq.qc.ca/wp-content/uploads/Publication-FSM-2016-11-17-final.pdf>.

2 Summary of the preparatory workshop for *États généraux de l'enseignement supérieur*, held Thursday, August 11, 2016, from 1:00-3:30 p.m., as part of the 2016 WSF Education Space. See FNEEQ's Carnet FSM, published fall 2016, <http://fneeq.qc.ca/wp-content/uploads/Publication-FSM-2016-11-17-final.pdf>.

États généraux de l'enseignement supérieur

While there are countless issues that merit being addressed in ÉGES, all of them cannot possibly be dealt with at once, and it is important to avoid taking a “shopping list” approach. These issues will need to be discussed beforehand, and choices will have to be made in terms of where to put the focus: professional orders, the relationship between education and labour, control of education by the people and communities, opposition to neoliberal management, credited and uncredited continuing education, student mobility, the proportion of women in education, research, funding, free education, and so on.

So when will these ÉGES take place? Spring 2017 was the initial timeframe agreed to by the education community. But for what? The next step or the formal launch? There are two schools of thought on this, each with its own strategy: a) holding the wide-scale event in spring 2017 and using its conclusions to build an action plan that would serve, among other things, to petition the political parties during the pre-election year; b) organizing the event for spring or fall 2018, as close as possible to the Québec general election. Not only has FNEEQ been given the mandate to plan for the spring 2017 timeline, it is our belief that delaying the ÉGES until 2018 will leave

insufficient time for our demands to make their way into the parties' education platforms. To break this impasse and ensure higher education speaks with one united voice, we propose that both strategies be combined in a vast approach extending over a period of more than a year. This idea seems to have the unanimous support of the “collectif ÉGES,” as does the notion that we need to shelve our differences and act in full transparency and solidarity.

It has been suggested that the ÉGES should be modeled after other events of a similar nature. But as activist Alexa Conradi said on the Night of Higher Education held at Bain Mathieu in spring 2015, one of the most important elements of this process should be “to spark new ideas.” Novelty creates a sense of attachment, of belonging, and helps keep the message fresh and new. In that sense, the goal of the ÉGES should be not only to converge, but also to diverge.

Our next challenge will be to make sure it happens and becomes a real and powerful lever for change. We are going to need you! ■

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