

Travailleurs-euses, étudiant-es : Même combat !
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Association of Graduate Students Employed at McGill (AGSEM), 2012-2013
Teaching Assistants' Unit Executive

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Article abstract

In the wake of the Québec student movement, graduate students of the 2012-2013 executive team for the Teaching Assistants' Unit of the Association of Graduate Students Employed at McGill (AGSEM) reflect on their individual backgrounds and motivations for pursuing union work. With various opportunities for employment on and off campus, what compels academic workers to serve their union; to become accountable to a diverse and growing membership, and to challenge the very institutional machinery upon which our careers can depend? As students, educators, activists, and workers, we reflect on these questions in considering how we have come to the union, why we have become advocates for workers' rights, and the kinds of challenges and successes we experienced.

TRAVAILLEURS-EUSES, ÉTUDIANT-ES : MÊME COMBAT!

ASSOCIATION OF GRADUATE STUDENTS EMPLOYED AT MCGILL (AGSEM),
2012-2013 TEACHING ASSISTANTS' UNIT EXECUTIVE

ABSTRACT. In the wake of the Québec student movement, graduate students of the 2012-2013 executive team for the Teaching Assistants' Unit of the Association of Graduate Students Employed at McGill (AGSEM) reflect on their individual backgrounds and motivations for pursuing union work. With various opportunities for employment on and off campus, what compels academic workers to serve their union; to become accountable to a diverse and growing membership, and to challenge the very institutional machinery upon which our careers can depend? As students, educators, activists, and workers, we reflect on these questions in considering how we have come to the union, why we have become advocates for workers' rights, and the kinds of challenges and successes we experienced.

TRAVAILLEURS-EUSES, ÉTUDIANT-ES : MÊME COMBAT!

RÉSUMÉ. Dans la foulée des mouvements étudiants qui ont eu lieu au Québec en 2012, les étudiants de 2^e et 3^e cycle et les membres du comité exécutif des auxiliai-res d'enseignement de l'Association des étudiants et étudiantes diplômés-ées employés-ées de McGill (AÉÉDEM) de 2012-2013 ont entrepris une réflexion sur leurs vécus et leurs motivations individuelles en ce qui a trait à leur impli-cation syndicale. Considérant l'éventail d'opportunités de travail sur le campus ainsi qu'hors campus, qu'est-ce qui motive ces travailleurs universitaires à demeurer au service du syndicat, à rendre des comptes à un nombre grandissant de membres aux profils variés et à contester l'employeur, une organisa-tion aux rouages très institutionnels, dont leur carrière dépend? Comme étudiants, enseignants, activistes et employés, nous réfléchissons à ces questions en nous attardant à la manière dont nous nous sommes engagés dans les rangs de l'association. Nous abordons aussi les raisons qui nous ont poussés à représenter les droits des travailleurs ainsi que les défis et les succès que nous avons vécus.

Founded in 1993, the Association of Graduate Students Employed at McGill (AGSEM) was initially certified to represent teaching assistants; 20 years later AGSEM is the largest labour union at McGill University, representing over

3,000 teaching assistants, exam invigilators, course lecturers, and instructors. With a long history and a progressive political presence on campus, AGSEM has worked with various groups and community organizations to advocate for workers' rights and has aligned itself in solidarity with a number of salient movements and causes. Since 2011, a number of social movements including the Quebec students' strike, Occupy, and Idle No More have collectively signified a growing and intensifying push against capitalism, neo-colonialism, and oppression. Labour unions, by definition, are implicated in this resistance as we are pressured to compromise previous gains for our members in response to austerity measures, and our rights to resist and protest such policies are threatened through increased surveillance and repression.

With various opportunities for employment on and off campus, what compels academic workers to serve their union; to become accountable to a diverse and growing membership and to challenge the very institutional machinery upon which our careers can depend? As students, educators, activists, and workers, what kind of learning do we experience in the context of union work? In this paper, the 2012-2013 executive team of AGSEM's Teaching Assistants' Unit engages in a reflexive exercise to think about these questions in considering how we have come to the union, why we have become advocates for workers' rights, and the kinds of challenges and successes we have experienced thus far.

JUSTIN MARLEAU, VICE PRESIDENT

Growing up, I had the privilege of living in an upper-middle class neighbourhood with good schools and many opportunities. However, as I grew up and made friends from outside my socioeconomic background, I realized how difficult life can be and how our current economic, political, and social systems are reinforcing societal inequity. Our society's current practices keep those born with the "wrong" name, the "wrong" skin tone or the "wrong" accent out of jobs they are qualified for, snatching opportunities away before one can even hope to pursue them.

I did not want to be part of a system that treats people in such a way, and so I joined student groups, political parties, and charity organizations that are supposed to make a difference in everyone's life. Unfortunately, many of the political organizations I have joined or been involved with have curried favour with the powerful, rather than promoting the interests of the powerless. The only organization that I joined which was not so craven and cynical was my labour union, AGSEM. Once I became an AGSEM delegate, I found that through working with others in the union I was able to make a real difference by bringing problems that my co-workers had out in the open. We managed to win important concessions from the University, particularly during the hectic (Fall 2011) semester-long workers' strike by MUNACA (the McGill University Non-Academic Certified Association / Public Service Alliance of Canada).

Since then, I have come to appreciate how the democratic and rights-based struggle of labour can bring out the best in people and can truly raise people up from desperate conditions.

MEGAN MERICLE, COMMUNICATIONS OFFICER

The most significant and positive difference in the quality of living for my family came as a result of my mother's decision to return to her studies and to earn a college degree. As a direct consequence of receiving an education, she secured a job caring for the elderly suffering from forms of dementia, such as Alzheimer's disease. My father was absent during most of my youth, and I did not know about the nature of his career path until shortly before he passed away in 2011. He had earned a bachelor's degree in history and master's degree in history and philosophy before working in the Canadian film industry. Later he worked as an organizer of unionization drives for workers in various industrial construction companies and plants in Alberta.

The experiences of my parents shaped my beliefs regarding student and labour organizing and my conviction that access to education is particularly crucial not only to make society more equitable, but also to create further understanding and awareness of our unique differences and similarities across race, class, sex, gender, religion, ability, and so forth. My parents' experiences demonstrated to me that education is the first step to challenging and dismantling social, political and economic inequalities.

I entered McGill University in 2009 as a Master's student in the Art History and Communication Studies department, and took a position in my Graduate Student Association (AHCS GSA). Soon, mobilizing other students around departmental issues led me to become interested in the labour conditions of graduate students. I worked as a teaching assistant and I experienced the effects of cuts to hours and positions in favour of hiring more precarious and non-unionized workers such as graders. My *real* education has occurred through the collaborative work that I have undertaken with my colleagues at AGSEM, the AHCS GSA, and in other mobilization groups. Without these experiences I would not have the same perspective about working with and for others, and I would not be aware of the radical potential for community and coalition-based forms of organizing.

Working for AGSEM has revealed to me that universities can be places where exploitative working conditions exist and are particularly difficult to challenge. Universities are powerful institutions and much of the labour that supports their existence is temporary and/or precarious. Unionizing university employees has been met with great resistance at McGill, and the unions that do exist have had to engage in long drawn-out battles to win rights for their members. Senior university administrators mobilize institutional power and resources to impose draconian and anti-progressive measures against student and labour

activists who work to improve the quality and accessibility of education and to promote social justice on and beyond our campuses. The University is not a de-colonized space, and it is not separate or distinct from systems of hierarchy, power, and privilege that continue to create inequalities — but this does not mean that we should simply give up on the radical possibilities of student and worker education to challenge these systems! Union activism has allowed me to cope with my own experiences and has provided me with a chance to learn, share and work in collaboration with others to create positive social change. I realize that student and labour unions need to work much harder to be transparent, accountable, and to create direct, participatory forms of organization.

ROSALIND HAMPTON, GRIEVANCE OFFICER

Struggles for social justice have always been part of my life. Both of my parents worked in social and community service jobs, and I grew up hearing stories of their experiences as activists in the 1960s American Civil Rights Movement. I have particularly powerful pre-adolescent memories of my mother's involvement in unionizing the employees of the social service agency for which she worked. I remember many meetings and a sense that it was an exciting and very stressful time. I did not completely understand what my mother and her friends were doing, but I knew that it was very important work. Later I would understand the risks she had taken and how she had compromised her chances for career advancement in order to pursue the unionization drive. I would also understand that it had been worth it to her, and that they had won.

In the context of the neighbourhood I grew up in, our family was relatively well off; many friends' parents were on social assistance, some working "under the table" to make ends meet (and there were always stories of the unlucky ones who got caught and had to find ways to reimburse welfare for thousands of dollars). Most of the working people in the neighbourhood had jobs that involved physical labour, poor working conditions, few benefits, and little if any job security. Health problems — particularly those related to hard work, high stress and low resources — were not uncommon. The rates of school disengagement were also high, and my sister and I were among the few who graduated from high school and went on to some form of post-secondary education. Thus, I grew up understanding the connections between employment conditions, job security, health, education, and intergenerational social outcomes.

Entering doctoral studies in Education at McGill in fall 2011, class-consciousness surged to the fore of my identity. Never before had I been so aware of my working-class background. The intersections of race- and class-based elitism at McGill were an intense culture shock for a Black woman of my background as I found myself inundated with spoken and unspoken messages that told me that I did not belong at this institution; that it was not meant for "people like me."

During my first semester, one of the loudest sources of these messages was the incessant stream of emails from the McGill's Media Relations Office, degrading and criminalizing the university's striking non-academic workers of the MUNACA union. I resented the condescending suggestion these messages conveyed, constructing a *we* – students, faculty members, and senior administrators – who were part of an elite McGill community that was being disturbed by the nuisance of striking workers: *them*. Further “othering” the MUNACA workers as outsiders, the senior administration attempted to erase their visible presence through securing injunctions moving picket lines further and further away from the University² and threatening pro-union students and faculty members with punitive measures for any show of support for MUNACA on campus. Identifying with the striking workers (among whom I found many more people of colour than elsewhere on campus), I became involved in MUNACA solidarity actions. The first meeting I attended was held at AGSEM.

The MUNACA strike, in essence, introduced me to the people and strategies that would allow me to claim my space at McGill; I became an “activist” and by the end of the school year, a union executive of AGSEM. Alongside the PhD program in which I am enrolled, I have engaged in a parallel course of non-formal learning in action from which I am gaining a diverse, grounded, and deeply meaningful education. Through student activism and working for AGSEM, I have learned about the role of universities in society, especially of “elite” universities like McGill. I have learned about workers' rights, the strengths and weaknesses of labour unions and the critical role we have to play in current neoliberal contexts. I have learned from colleagues and comrades of all ages, and from academic and non-academic workers from a variety of disciplines and personal backgrounds. I have learned about acting in solidarity across differences, to defend others and myself against social injustice and institutionalized oppression. I have been reminded of the many ways that “school” is not synonymous with “education.” I have learned that change requires risk-taking; that when it feels like everything about you is under attack, it's possible to find allies, organize, stand up and fight back.

SUNCI AVLIJAS, MOBILIZATION OFFICER

I am actively involved as a student at McGill because I believe that universities are a keystone of society, and if they are to serve society we must fight for them. During the years I spent completing my undergraduate studies in Ontario and a master's of science in biology at McGill, I repeatedly witnessed our universities being aggressively airbrushed and cut into unrecognizable glossy models on the verge of becoming universities in name only. Today's university has been so well compartmentalized into a corporate mould that the single most important driver of decisions regarding all university affairs is financial returns. If investing in the public image of the university is more profitable

than the actual quality of education and the student and research experience, it is considered only logical to invest in image and reputation at the expense of everything else. Decisions at universities are made by a handful of senior administrators and a board of governors who do not have any investment in the best interests of students, professors, teaching support and any other workers who are part of the university community, nor are they concerned with the benefits universities serve to our society. Students are seen as more or less transient paying customers, and university employees including professors and other teaching support workers are considered an unfortunate necessary expense required to render a service. I was drawn to unions on campus because collective organization and action are the most viable strategies, for both workers and students, to successfully fight for our universities.

At both universities I have attended (McMaster and McGill), student associations have been disenfranchising. In my experience, at the best of times, the associations are actively depoliticized spaces for students to socialize and build support networks; at the worst, they are bureaucratic cliques in the grips of (sometimes well-meaning) executives who think they “know what’s best” and fear their members being allowed to make decisions. I became involved with AGSEM’s Teaching Assistants’ Unit during the mobilization for our last collective agreement and was excited by the glimpse this provided me of the power that a group of organized workers can have. In parallel, I was living an incredible collective student strike action that shook all of Quebec. Observing the failures and successes of these labour and student unions, three crucial elements for collective action became evident: first, direct democracy that is accessible to all members; second, accountability of executives; and third, independence. My goal in joining the AGSEM executive was not to organize a particular collective action. I wanted to work to transform our union into a space where members can participate to organize themselves. To do this, executives cannot be afraid of what members will say or how they will vote at a general assembly: a mandate is only words on a page unless there is a solid group of real people who can talk, organize, and act together. A union whose members view themselves as passive customers receiving a service and their union executives as yet another set of bosses is an utter failure. To be able to fight, unions must be empowered and the key to empowered unions is empowered workers.

CORA-LEE CONWAY, FINANCE OFFICER

Although I am currently in the PhD program in Educational Studies at McGill, I come to it by way of a BA and MA in Political Science from Toronto’s York University. I have long since been fascinated by political systems, forms of governance, and the conditions in which free thinking people relinquish significant aspects of their personal autonomy to become citizens, governed by albatross-like political structures that often fail to deliver on their promises.

Projections of plenty have not held true and the resulting impact has become too pervasive to placate, too vast to disregard, and too systemic to “band aid” with piecemeal solutions.

We are in a season of protest, an era of movements aimed at calling into question the failures and breaches of the social contract that binds us. So last year when I had the pleasure of working as a teaching assistant in McGill’s Department of Political Science, the juxtaposition between what we discussed in the classroom and what was happening outside our window and beyond was truly uncanny. The students sat in classrooms and listened to lectures about nation formation, the nature of political revolutions, and the role of labour and early union movements in shaping modern capitalist regimes. Many students submitted final papers that explored the political unrest and strikes of France in 1968. All this while hundreds of thousands of students in Quebec demonstrated and voted to strike in protest of the proposed tuition increase; and just months earlier McGill non-academic workers had taken to the streets to exercise their right to strike in hopes of achieving better terms in a new collective agreement. As an educator, I attempted to facilitate some nuanced understanding of the parallels in the classroom, as a student I sought opportunities to learn about the issues, and as a worker I looked to my union for a better understanding of my rights in this very unique situation.

AGSEM is a union that works to bargain for protections and benefits for its workers, and it is also a strong advocate for the quality of education at McGill. In this sense, we are actually an important ally to the University, although it rarely seems that this is understood. As part of our last round of bargaining, for example, AGSEM negotiated for first-time Teaching Assistants to receive paid-training sessions, thereby contributing to their education as both workers and graduate students. An integral part of our quality of education campaign is educating workers about their rights, the context in which we work and the services that are available to them via their membership in the union. As AGSEM’s Finance Officer, I gained a keen awareness of the trust that the membership instills in executives to exercise our judgment and discretion in using resources in ways that support not only the union and its members but the labour movement as a whole. As executives, we are accountable and our actions can and should be called into question. It wasn’t my years of financial or administrative experience that brought me to this role, or the influence of my mother’s long-time passionate involvement with her union as a public servant, but the knowledge that I was taking on the task with a group of individuals committed to being accountable to the membership of our union and to each other.

LOOKING (AND LEARNING) FORWARD: THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES

We came together at AGSEM as five graduate students from a diverse range of ethno-racial, class, and academic backgrounds. When we were elected as the Teaching Assistants' Unit Executive we already knew one another's unique strengths and weaknesses as student organizers and activists, and this gave us a solid foundation upon which to build an executive team with a shared commitment and vision. The struggle for workers' rights at an institution like McGill – where recent events such as the MUNACA strike and the senior administration's attempts to ban the right to protest on campus³ have increasingly and publicly highlighted a disregard for the rights and autonomy of students and employees as well as a prioritizing of economic returns over the quality of teaching and learning – requires profound inter-union and student-worker organizing and solidarity. As we look forward to the future of AGSEM and of post-secondary education, we stress above all else the importance of popular education campaigns on the university campuses where we work and in the communities where we live, in promoting critical awareness of the ties that bind and empower us to act in our collective struggle against neoliberalism.

NOTES

1. Roughly translates in English as, "Workers, Students: Same Struggle". A popular slogan in the 2012 Quebec student movement.
2. Regarding the conditions of the first injunction, see <http://munaca.com/node/345>, and regarding the second and third injunctions see <http://www.munaca.com/node/368>
3. For more information see <http://protesttheprotocol.com/category/in-the-media/>

SUNCI AVLIJAS graduated with an MSc in Biology in 2013. She served as the Mobilization Officer of the 2012-2013 Teaching Assistants' Unit of AGSEM and as the interim Vice President of the same unit from September-October 2013. She is currently an Officer on the TA Unit Bargaining Committee.

CORA-LEE CONWAY is a PhD student in Educational Studies and served as the 2012-2013 Finance Officer of the Teaching Assistants' Unit of AGSEM.

ROSALIND HAMPTON is a PhD Candidate in Educational Studies and served as the 2012-2013 Grievance Officer of the Teaching Assistants' Unit of AGSEM. She is currently an Officer on the TA Unit Bargaining Committee.

MEGAN MERICLE graduated with an MA in Art History in 2013. She served as the Communications Officer of the 2012-2013 Teaching Assistants' Unit of AGSEM.

JUSTIN MARLEAU is a PhD Candidate in Biology who served as the Vice President of the 2012-2013 Teaching Assistants' Unit of AGSEM, re-elected and continuing in the role of VP through the summer of 2013.

SUNCI AVLJAS a obtenu une maîtrise en biologie en 2013. Elle a travaillé au sein du comité exécutif des auxiliaires d'enseignement (AE) de l'AÉÉDEM comme agente de mobilisation en 2012-2013 et elle a occupé le poste de vice-présidente par intérim en septembre et en octobre 2013. Elle fait présentement partie du comité de négociation des AE.

CORA-LEE CONWAY est étudiante au doctorat en éducation à l'Université McGill et a été agente des finances du comité exécutif des auxiliaires de l'enseignement de l'AÉÉDEM en 2012-2013.

ROSALIND HAMPTON est doctorante en éducation à l'Université McGill. En 2012-2013, elle a occupé le poste d'agente de griefs du comité exécutif des auxiliaires de l'enseignement de l'AÉÉDEM. Elle fait présentement partie du comité de négociation du comité exécutif des AE.

MEGAN MERICLE a reçu une maîtrise en histoire de l'art en 2013. Elle était agente de communication au sein du comité exécutif des auxiliaires de l'enseignement de l'AÉÉDEM en 2012-2013.

JUSTIN MARLEAU est doctorant en biologie. Il a été vice-président du comité exécutif des auxiliaires de l'enseignement de l'AÉÉDEM en 2012-2013. Réélu, il a poursuivi son rôle de VP au cours de l'été 2013.