

Strength in Numbers?

Why Radical Students Need a New Organizing Model

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In October of 2006, 1,000 students gathered at a mass meeting at Simon Fraser University (SFU) to impeach seven elected student union directors who were widely perceived to be acting against student interests and to be supported by the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS).¹ In the lead up to the assembly, the impeachment campaign involved classroom speaking, petitions, motions of non-confidence passed by 30 different student groups, occupations of student union space, and banner drops. The mobilization culminated in a court case that acknowledged the legitimacy of the impeachment meeting. Compared to these vigorous grassroots initiatives, the SFU component of the CFS National Day of Action four months later on February 7th, 2007 was dismal. Thirty people, mostly consisting of recently-impeached student leaders and their friends, stood around holding prefabricated “Freeze Tuition Fees” signs. Considering the recent spike in radical organizing at SFU, it was no coincidence that they protested alone. Having reclaimed their student government, many students at SFU were not interested in supporting a rally orchestrated by the national organization widely perceived to be linked to the actions of the impeached student officials.

These two campaigns, and the connections between them, have something important to tell us about student organizing on

national and local levels in English Canada today. If we are to make gains in pressing areas, including the elimination of tuition fees, it is imperative that students engage in debates around Canada's largest left student organization. In this article, I highlight some of the recent charges that have been leveled against the CFS. I argue that because of its bureaucratic structure, the CFS has become incapable of responding productively to student initiatives or mobilizations from below. In a context such as this, and in the interest of turning the student movement into a powerful force for social change, we need to build a pan-Canadian student activist network that could link together activists in order to push the CFS to the left, and help us in building our own grassroots campaigns.

Since 1981, the CFS has been the largest left-of-centre student group in Canada. Today, it represents 400,000 students on 80 different college and university campuses across Canada. It aims to be a national voice for Canadian students. The CFS has focused much of its work on campaigns to stop tuition fee increases and lobbying Ottawa to restore federal transfer payments for post-secondary education. The CFS also maintains a separate organization, CFS-Services, which operates as a business arm made up mostly of corporate partnerships. CFS-Services is the corporate section of the organization and seems increasingly to be as important as CFS's advocacy work. Locals of the CFS can sign on to some or all of the services offered by CFS-Services, including student handbooks, a health plan, cell phone provider discounts, international student cards, travel discounts, and housing databases. All locals are required to join CFS-Services if they join the CFS, and they are strongly encouraged to support these businesses.

Despite the CFS's stated mandate to represent the interests of Canadian students, many student organizers have begun to wonder whether the CFS has become a bureaucratic force that places its financial interests ahead of the policies it claims to uphold. Regardless of the specific content of these concerns, there is a contradiction that needs to be addressed: why does a national student organization that claims to be at the forefront of advancing student rights, engage in actions that consistently work to marginalize the kinds of initiatives needed to accomplish these objectives? In order to understand this contradiction, it is useful to consider the problems arising from the demands of maintaining the organization's bureaucracy. Although the CFS presents itself as the progressive voice of Canadian students, its practices tend

to suppress grassroots student organizing, especially when this organizing calls the practices of the CFS itself into question.

Several examples from British Columbia reveal troubling aspects of CFS strategies and point toward problems at the national level. Either by coincidence or habit, CFS-BC locals have in recent years been plagued by serious financial irregularities. In September of 2007, the CFS-BC office finally presented its outstanding audited statements for 2004 and 2005. In this overarching context of financial irregularity, the Douglas College Students' Union (DSU) – Local 18 of the CFS – has received the most public attention. As a result of an audit reporting “significant deficiencies in internal controls” three reports were featured on Global TV during the fall of 2006.² A long-time staff person within the CFS national bureaucracy responsible for looking after the DSU finances was recently accused of taking a \$20,000 loan from the student union to put a down payment on a house.³ The audit also reported that the CFS-BC made a series of questionable loans (totaling \$200,000) to the DSU in 2005 and 2006 in order to make up for the fact that the College administration refused to hand over student fees due to financial problems at the student union.⁴

The CFS has also been accused of interfering in student elections by providing resources to help slates get elected with the expectation that these students will follow CFS positions once in office. In the SFU student elections in the spring of 2006, a group campaigning as the “Common Sense” slate was elected on a platform considered by many to represent CFS interests. In previous years, the most experienced slate member from Common Sense actively tried to thwart a graduate health plan when the selected carrier was not the CFS-Services owned National Student Health Network.⁵

Within three months in office, the first action of the Common Sense slate was to fire a 26-year veteran employee of the SFU. In the ensuing confrontation, students became increasingly outraged when CFS-backed directors attempted to hide the non-student status of their “most experienced” elected official and prohibit dissenting voices from participating in their meetings by writing threatening letters to staff or by strategizing to hold meetings under unreasonable circumstances.⁶ The amount of work put into this firing, and the attempts to recover from the reaction, came at the expense of the “Common Sense” campaign promise to “reduce tuition fees and campaign effectively” for students.⁷

Student election slates purportedly connected to the CFS have been a point of contention in BC. Some student nominees

have alleged that, while they may not have had direct contact with staffers higher up in the CFS-provincial component, their slate was connected to the CFS. This link may be a staff person of the Federation, a staff person from another student union local, or a former elected executive member. This CFS-friendly slate “helper” often provides direction for the campaign and designs and prints campaign posters. Student politician Derrick Harder describes how a former Simon Fraser Student Society (SFSS) staff person was involved in helping his slate:

Our posters were made off-campus, and we had no involvement in their creation. Our platform was a cookie-cutter list of Federation campaigns and slogans. We had a strategy meeting at the house of a then-Student Society staffer, who we referred to by the code-name “Peter” throughout the campaign.⁸

At other times, students running on CFS-backed slates have had little knowledge of the political dynamics of the organization either on their campus or nationally. As a former elected student explains: “I didn’t find out until after I’d already won that it was the CFS doing it all. They made our posters. They were sending up people from other campuses to help us leaflet.”⁹

In 2005, the elected chair of the University of Victoria Students Union was asked to resign when she allowed a slate to use the CFS office on that campus to strategize and hold meetings, some of which she attended.¹⁰ Similar situations involving the controversial hiring of elections oversight officials have taken place in Manitoba and Ontario.¹¹ Although the CFS denies any involvement in student elections, the experiences of students involved in the process in BC tell another story.

Along with allegedly manipulating student elections through slates, many argue that there is insufficient autonomy in CFS locals’ hiring practices. Many locals are currently staffed by CFS-friendly staff members who are often former CFS-backed student politicians. They are thus ill-disposed to critique the national organization, and instead maintain a relatively narrow CFS-orientated focus. At the Simon Fraser Student Society in 2006, this meant that the CFS-friendly slate took a heavy-handed anti-union approach to meet political objectives consistent with CFS interests. The court case arising from the 2006 impeachment proceedings revealed that the long-standing staff member was fired for asking “inappropriate” questions at a national CFS meeting. In an affidavit, an elected

officer of the SFSS recounted the situation to her colleague in the following manner: “Yeah, we’re looking at letting her go. We don’t trust her. She attempted to bring speculation upon the CFS at the CFS conference in May by publicly asking inappropriate questions during some of the meetings.”¹² To begin the process of firing the Simon Fraser Student Society employee, a “non-disciplinary” investigation was suddenly announced one morning, and seven staff were instructed to go home and not to speak to one another. During the course of the firing, these “progressive” student politicians allegedly violated the staff’s collective agreement 28 times in just a few weeks.¹³

After a particularly heated meeting attended by 50 students, during which students and staff expressed outrage over the executive’s actions, the President of the student union sent a letter to the staff’s union – the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) – threatening to disclose private employee information they felt “could have the effect of rendering a particular employee or group of employees unemployable in their chosen field.”¹⁴ Recourse to anti-union activity by a CFS-friendly slate demonstrates just how far some student leaders will go in order to ensure control over the SFU local, which has been a top financial contributor to the CFS for several years.

The CFS has also had its share of problems when it comes to addressing the interests of Aboriginal students in the organization. In the late 1990s, this issue came to a head when – outraged over the treatment of a female Aboriginal student in BC by a prominent CFS staffer – several locals initiated a campaign to “de-colonize the Federation.”¹⁵ The CFS leadership rushed to its staffer’s defense. In response, a number of locals brought forward a motion demanding that he no longer be allowed to hold his position and that the CFS fund an autonomous Aboriginal student organization.¹⁶ Despite the support this initiative could have lent to the struggle for Aboriginal self-determination within the CFS, the motion was defeated. Instead, the organization opted for an internal inquiry. Predictably, the inquiry produced no significant changes – with the exception of the staff member moving from Vancouver to the National office, where he still works. This demonstrates the lengths to which the organization will go to defend those who are part of its core group.

These examples from BC provide some insight into how the CFS attempts to gain and maintain control over student union locals. From my experiences as a student organizer, it appears that

this is a pervasive form of coordination that acts to shut down critical and left-wing student voices. Despite their significant involvement in student union locals, the CFS has accomplished little in the last ten years on issues of tuition and access to post-secondary education. Barring the odd tuition freeze in certain provinces and the extremely rare fee reduction, the organization has made only minimal gains to improve the lives of students. It is important, then, to understand why an organization in this position would focus so much time and energy on student union locals.

The CFS needs to control student union locals in order to ensure the overall stability of its bureaucratic structure and moneymaking “services.” Leaders must attempt to maintain not only the organization’s structure, but also their paid positions. These same people often have the final say on what forms of action are taken and when they will occur. It is therefore not surprising that they are fearful of student-led grassroots initiatives that threaten to disrupt the smooth functioning of the institutional structure. These fear-inducing initiatives include attempts to engage in direct action on campus or to advance arguments that make connections to broader social struggles. Although the CFS reacts strongly to potential “disruptions” of its organizational culture, it also limits involvement in sanctioned activities by marshalling people’s fear of both right wing students and the progressive left. Despite numerous attempts by radicals at the student union level to reform the CFS, the organization has remained impervious to change.

Rather than use income from student union members to fund campaigns, there has been a strong push to further develop the services arm of the organization. The problem with CFS-Services is that it does not provide alternatives to mainstream corporate approaches or develop autonomous resources for the student movement. Instead, the services developed by the CFS promote dependent relationships with major corporations. Profits made from this part of the organization are then recapitalized into additional services instead of being put into advocacy efforts. This emphasis on business has meant that many students now recognize the CFS primarily as a service-providing organization.

The suppression of any type of dissent within the CFS is obvious to anyone who has attended a provincial or national meeting of the Federation. The CFS Annual General Meeting is touted as the highest and most democratic decision-making body of the organization. However, these meetings are tightly controlled. As one student noted after attending one such meeting, “It seemed

like the staff was more involved than the [national] executive."¹⁷ For several years, there have been complaints that students can't plan for meetings because they are not given the agenda ahead of time. Although motions put forward by locals must be handed in two weeks in advance, the agenda, the minutes from previous meetings, the multi-page campaign strategy, and the budget are not distributed until delegates arrive. When locals put forward motions that challenge current ways of operating, it is not uncommon for the meeting to move so slowly that those motions never come forward. A graduate student from McGill reported his experience trying to pass a motion at the CFS National Graduate Caucus meeting in 2006:

[our local] put forward a motion to mandate the executive to consult the locals in the development of the agenda and discussion topics and that all discussion documents be circulated three weeks in advance. The motion received broad support from locals, but given that it was the last item on the agenda (the only place for caucus members' motions and issues is the "new business" item, which was opened around 5 p.m. after three days of exhausting meetings, talks and social gatherings), and as federation representatives spoke against the idea of providing documents in advance, the motion was tabled until the next meeting.¹⁸

Requests to have content circulated in advance to allow for further participation at the local level have been raised on several occasions and at several meetings but have been consistently denied.¹⁹ This kind of management of the most "democratic" body of the organization demonstrates a strong tendency toward stifling forms of dissent or grassroots activism that might reform the CFS.

Because of its structure, the CFS is inevitably bureaucratic. At the local level, student unions develop their own bureaucratic structures and institutional inertia. But when these student unions buttress another well-funded level of bureaucracy at the national level – where it is unaccountable to students at large – the problem is intensified. The CFS staff is largely made up of former student politicians who have worked with the organization for dozens of years. Staffed at the national office by bureaucrats receiving comfortable salaries, the CFS is out of touch with the precarious experiences of the students who make up their membership. The transitory nature of student life means that the established

bureaucracy, with its institutional memory and permanent staff, has a built-in advantage over rank-and-file student activists seeking to change the CFS.

The CFS also regularly threatens to sue student newspapers and students that critique the organization's tactics. While as of yet there has been no known instance of the organization filing a libel suit against a student newspaper, it has made a habit of sending out threatening legal letters. Recently, two student politics bloggers and several student newspapers have received notice in writing from the CFS to remove articles or alter references to the CFS.²⁰ The lack of reporting on the organization which has arisen as a consequence of this practice has contributed to an environment where perspectives critical of the CFS leadership and bureaucracy can be ignored. And while one might think that a progressive student organization claiming to speak for Canadian students would allow student journalists to critique and debate its work, this has not been the case.

The entrenched bureaucracy of the CFS is not only due to structural stagnation. It is a political matter. The CFS is often viewed as an extension of the youth wing of the New Democratic Party (NDP), a sort of farm team for student politicians being groomed to move into the NDP big leagues. Ideologically, the CFS and the NDP share the belief that state intervention in the economy can mitigate capitalist ruling relations and that minor reforms constitute major victories. Because both of these groups want to reform capitalism through the state, neither welcomes radical elements with alternative views on social change. The CFS views radical students intent on confronting capitalist ruling relations as a threat to their bureaucratic operations. The emphasis on the state as a vehicle for change by both the NDP and the CFS is deeply flawed. Neither of these organizations seriously challenge the oppressive, violent force of the state, nor do they offer any meaningful resources to those most marginalized by its actions.

Instead, the CFS tacitly supports the NDP in elections and hopes that – if elected – the NDP will freeze tuition. In the lead-up to these elections, the CFS launches campaigns aimed at boosting youth voter turnout and sending the message that “voting education” could greatly change their university experience. Not only does the CFS attempt to appear non-partisan, it fails to address the economic dynamics of tuition under neo-liberalism. The CFS's political framework is based upon a lobbying perspective that suggests that meaningful change can be won through press

releases, slogans, and a media campaign followed by annual acts of ritual protest. The general idea is that the government will be unable to ignore students' concerns if every CFS local projects a single coherent message. The materials used by the CFS are, for the most part, several years old and are designed as ready made campaigns to be distributed at the local level. CFS materials are intended to be factual, with straightforward information from which student unions can tailor their tactics. However, the top-down attempt to prepackage information rather than find strategies for drawing students themselves into political activity is ultimately a demobilizing method of "organizing." By impeding the development of a base of student power, the hierarchical nature of the organization prevents the CFS from fulfilling the goals it sets out to achieve.

The bureaucratic nature of the CFS also means that the organization is incapable of strategic or tactical adaption. By focusing on negative demands (like "stop the cuts") rather than incitements to imagine our university communities as they *could be*, the CFS keeps tight control over its "mobilizations." And while this strategy has occasionally enabled them to mobilize on a mass level, it has nevertheless prevented the movement from addressing the kind of education we seek to "access" in the first place. What is the point of fighting for – and winning – universal access to education if the kind of "education" being produced furthers a neoliberal agenda and amounts to little more than job training in the interests of corporations? Students need to fight for the democratization of campus institutions and the elimination of corporate influences on curricula. We need to fight for critical and progressive pedagogy, not just "accessible" job training.

In order to make gains for truly accessible education, even on the basic issue of tuition, it is worthwhile to think about how to bring change to the CFS. The organization's resources could make an important contribution to social change and cross-country radicalism if they were well utilized and if the organization was democratized. Historically, the radical left has tried to make such changes in order to take advantage of these resources and build a powerful student movement. A brief look at the impact of the 1995 Day of Action provides some insight into attempts to transform the CFS. January 25, 1995 marked the CFS's first-ever national student day-long strike. On that day, 100,000 students from across Canada marched and picketed their institutions. That year, the federal Liberals declared a cut of \$7 billion in public funding to

social programs, including post-secondary education, health care, housing and social assistance. These cuts resulted in the largest tuition fee increases in Canadian history.

In preparation for the one-day strike, rank-and-file “student action committees” formed on several campuses. Although the national CFS leadership enabled the day of action by providing campaign materials and calling for the strike, it was the action committees that made the day a success. In the years after the 1995 strike, many of the student activists involved in these action committees gained leadership positions within local student unions and became involved with the CFS. At CFS national meetings these activists pushed the Federation to put more money into campaigns and to step up the fight for affordable education. They also formed a loose-knit “radical left caucus” that met during the meetings and maintained a network to share information between Federation meetings.

In 1997 this informal network launched the *Student Activist Newspaper* and the Direct Action Solidarity Network. Using these vehicles, activists tried to push the CFS to the left until the network dissolved in October of 1999. The newspaper enabled student activists to discuss victories and connect student activism to broader social struggles.

Between 1994 and 1996, 20 student union locals brought forward referenda questions on whether or not to leave the Federation.²¹ These referenda took place as forces from below pushed the CFS to the left. In response, students affiliated with the Young Liberals formed a right-of-centre national student group called the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations (CASA) that refused to incorporate “social issues” into its mandate. The history of mobilization from below shows the possibility of building a solid activist network to organize effective student days of action with CFS resources. This strategy could significantly boost our capacity to impact government policy and create a new layer of radical student activists. If the CFS put resources into developing a student activist newspaper or holding conferences for student activists instead of student bureaucrats, it could greatly assist in the coordination of student struggles across the country. Of course if the CFS were to do this, or to push for Days of Action involving significant grassroots mobilization they might unwittingly inspire a renewed student movement that could challenge the CFS bureaucracy.

Since activist strategies from below have not yet managed to effectively change the CFS what can be done? First, we should recognize that some of the most interesting student-led activism in English Canada since 1990 has had little to do with the official structures of the CFS, and often very little to do with elected student representatives either. Instead, these actions were led by small groups committed to radical student-led initiatives from below. In the year following the CFS's first national student day of action, one group led students in Toronto to occupy a downtown bank office over-night in order to make connections between student debt and tuition increases. In 1998, students in Vancouver organized a sit-in at the Mexican consulate in solidarity with students on strike in Mexico.

Innovative forms of campus resistance have highlighted the capacity of student organizing. In 1997, students used direct action tactics in their efforts to disrupt the meeting of the Asian Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) at the University of British Columbia and, that same year, student occupations swept nine universities in Ontario, one in Quebec, and two in BC. CUPE 3903, representing teaching assistants and contract faculty at York University, went out on strike for 78 days in 2000 and 2001 with tuition waivers among their key demands. The 2002 protest at Concordia University that blocked Benjamin Netanyahu from speaking also demonstrated how direct actions could serve to unsettle apologists for Israeli apartheid.

The greatest mobilizations in which the CFS has had little involvement have taken place in Quebec. In 2005, a student strike brought the province to its knees for three months. The strike came in response to the provincial government's plans to cut grants and transform them into loans, a move that would effectively double the debt of working-class students. At the strike's highest point, half of the province's student population – over 230,000 students – were in the streets. The students made decisions and voted on the outcome of the strike at general assemblies involving the entire student body. 100,000 students from 20 student unions rejected the agreement eventually reached by student government leaders. The strike ended when the province caved and offered to return \$70 million to grants immediately, and \$103 million over four years. This organizing model – spearheaded by radical students – demonstrates how mobilizing outside CFS-type bureaucratic structures is both possible and vital to winning concrete gains for students.

Many people argue that the student movement in the United States is weak because it does not have a national student body like the CFS. However, the efforts of US radical student activists working together without a large and bureaucratic organization provide a glimpse at innovative forms of organizing. A new iteration of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) is working towards building a network of students to organize across campuses. It already has more than 200 chapters. Given the highly entrenched bureaucracy of the CFS, victories will not be won by trying to play by their rules. Perhaps an organization like the SDS could be useful in Canada and might provide a model to either bypass or help reform the CFS.

For far too long, activists in the English Canadian student movement have relied on the framework of the CFS to build ties with organizers working on other campuses. Even if radicals are able to take over a student union local for a couple of years by winning student elections, we still need to build a pan-Canadian student movement that can provide a framework and resources for a variety of activist projects. The history of efforts to organize beyond the confines of the CFS confirm that we are in dire need of a network that can enable activists to build connections across university campuses.

Radical student activists in Canada could connect through either a common publication or a series of student activist conferences intended to build a network. Provincial student activist networks could do more than collectively criticize the CFS and work to improve it: they could also organize and support ongoing grassroots campaigns. This would involve developing historical awareness, institutional memory, and a critique of the CFS. Such a network could also help new activists in student unions to strengthen their work and reform their organization. But regardless of the particular means by which it is accomplished, coordinating autonomous student activists outside of the CFS bureaucracy is imperative to both challenging the inertia of bureaucracy and pushing the organization to the left, but also to sustaining ongoing mobilizations against capitalist ruling relations. ★

Notes

- 1 In following the same terminology used by the CFS, most references in this article to the organization will refer to “the CFS.” Student dues are paid to CFS-Provincial, CFS-National and CFS-Services, and when the CFS as a whole is critiqued, the CFS will insist that these are different organizations. Information about the impeached directors alleged connections to the CFS can be found here: Ferguson, Dylan. “A Banner Darkly: The Rise in Influence of the Canadian Federation of Students.” *The Manitoban Online*, <http://www.themanitoban.com/2006-2007/0314/120.A.banner.darkly.php> (accessed September 6, 2007) and at Murphy, Ryan Andrew. “The Hunsdale of Notre Dame: A True Story.” *The Peak*. September 16, 2006. <http://www.peak.sfu.ca/the-peak/2006-3/issue3/lesfss2.html> (accessed September 6, 2007).
- 2 Dailymotion. “CFS Corruption 1.” http://www.dailymotion.com/student3/video/xnbzw_cfs-corruption-1_news (accessed September 23, 2007).
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 Millar, Erin. “Five students’ unions try to dump the Canadian Federation of Students” *Macleans.ca*, September 20, 2007. http://www.macleans.ca/education/universities/article.jsp?content=20070920_194736_3180 (accessed September 23, 2007).
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- 6 For full information on the strategizing of that slate read Andrea Sandau’s affidavit at http://www.studentunion.ca/forum/Sandau_affidavit_2.pdf (accessed September 6, 2007).
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- 12 StudentUnion.ca. “Statement of Andrea Sandau.” <http://www.studentunion.ca/2006/10/andrea-sandau-university-relations.html> (accessed September 6, 2007).

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- 13 The employee was reinstated through a mediator from the Labour Relations Board post-impeachment. See Canadian Union of Public Employees, "Justice for Fired CUPE member at Simon Fraser Student Society." January 11, 2007. http://cupe.ca/media/Justice_for_fired_CU (accessed September 6, 2007).
- 14 Letter to Canadian Union of Public Employees from Shawn Hunsdale, August 31, 2006.
- 15 Anderson, Kris. "CFS Executive Director Escapes Assault Charges." *The Peak*, June 15, 1998.
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- 18 Post Graduate Student Society at McGill. "Council Reports" April 2006. http://pgss.mcgill.ca/archives/pgsscouncil_documents_2005-06.pdf p.286 (accessed September 6, 2007).
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