

The Rise of the Right on Campuses

-- Anna Malla & Kira Page

In the larger political arena as well as locally, the last several years have been marked by neoliberalization, privatization, and an increasingly able and emboldened Right. The impact on grassroots organizing around social justice issues has been heavy, and on campuses across the country, progressive groups have been facing increasingly aggressive attacks from conservative forces. Public Interest Research Groups, or PIRGs, have been often been at the centre of it. It makes sense: PIRGs are some of the only long-standing campus-based social justice institutions, and are central sites of Palestine organizing.

QPIRG McGill was the first of the PIRGs in Canada whose opt-outs (the mechanism by which students can get a refund for their fee) were placed on-line by a university administration. Shortly thereafter, a highly strategic campaign, organized by Conservative McGill, Hillel and a few front groups, was launched in 2007 on McGill campus, specifically targeting QPIRG. The campaign's explicit goal was to encourage McGill students to opt-out of the \$3.75 fee per semester on-line, while the implicit aim of this campaign was clearly to deligitimize and defund this type of institution on campus. Tactics have ranged from claiming we support terrorism, to encouraging students to buy beer and pizza instead of funding us.

The effect of such a campaign has been astonishing. While the financial impacts have been felt heavily at QPIRG McGill (we lost over \$20,000 in opt-outs last year), the burden on our organization to defend ourselves against libelous attacks has been the biggest drain. Staff and board alike have been forced into a position of working non-stop to defend ourselves on campus rather than actually being able to carry out the work we are mandated to do. Their tactics have pushed us from being a social justice organization with stable funding into unknown territory, where we are not sure from one semester to the next what kind of funding we will have, what attack is coming next, and whether or not we can keep going in this climate.

At McGill over the past five years, we have watched the Administration crack down on students and workers: the shutting down of Architecture Cafe, McGill's last student run food service; attempting to evict the campus sexual assault support centre from their space; shutting down the prayer space available to Muslim students; their constant antagonism against workers during the MUNACA strike and negotiations; similar de-funding tactics against CKUT, the campus radio station; and the Administration's decision to call riot police during the demonstrations against tuition hikes this past November.

Furthermore, the campaign at McGill is certainly part of a larger strategy by conservatives across Canada to de-fund and deligitimize these kinds of institutions. Audio files leaked in 2009 exposed members of the Ontario 'Progressive' Conservatives of Canada (OPCCA) training young Conservatives in strategies aimed at de-funding groups such as QPIRG. According to the Wikileaks article regarding the Ontario Conservatives, "the OPCCA is attempting to covertly influence the political climate of Ontario's university campuses". In an exposé by McGill students Kristin Li and Niko Block about this campaign on the part of the conservatives to shut down PIRGs across Canada, they highlight similar attacks on PIRGs in Halifax, Waterloo, Vancouver, Kingston, and Ottawa (<http://www.mcgilldaily.com/2011/01/the-anti-pirg-campus-conservative-conspiracy/>). While the focus of these attacks tends to be against those organizations taking a critical stance against Israel, we have also witnessed an organized young generation of conservatives who are ready, willing and able to fight against the Left by any means necessary.

In the midst of funding cuts to post-secondary education and increased government austerity measures, university campuses are becoming increasingly antagonistic places for progressive, let alone radical, organizing. The road ahead in some ways is not looking so positive, with governments and corporations (read: universities) in cahoots to raise tuition and decrease public education funding, alongside increasingly organized conservative students who will go to any length to quash radical organizing on campuses. But there is one, albeit strong glimmer of hope: students are getting pissed off-- whether about the inaccessibility of their education or about the seemingly endless attacks on progressive student organizations-- and they are organizing.

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