

“Le communautaire à boutte” : A national movement taking action & demanding to be heard (with Sophie Tétrault-Martel & Caroline Chartier)

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Caroline Chartier: Getting the “Le communautaire à boutte” movement to catch fire can be quite difficult, because we all share the same reality. Needs are growing and the population is aging. Finding housing is difficult. Affording food is difficult. Psychological distress is widespread. And we are holding all of this together with the best of intentions and very little funding.

Émilie Pontbriand: You’re listening to Lets Imagine, a podcast that explores major issues affecting the nonprofit sector. I’m your host, Émilie Pontbriand. At Imagine Canada, we believe in the power of collective action to advance social, economic, and environmental justice. Our podcast, made possible with the support of Carters Professional Corporation, is an invitation to imagine a more just and equitable future. This week on the Let’s Imagine podcast, we’re discussing the challenges facing Quebec’s community sector and looking at an initiative that has emerged from the sector in recent months: “Le communautaire à boutte” movement. At Imagine Canada, we’ve been following the movement’s work with great interest—and, if I may say so, with admiration—because we know how difficult it is to mobilize organizations that are already overwhelmed, attract the attention of elected officials and the media, and achieve this level of visibility.

I’m therefore pleased to welcome two spokespeople for the movement: Sophie Tétrault-Martel, a community worker at the Centre des femmes de Longueuil, and

Caroline Chartier, Assistant Director of the Centre Roland-Bertrand in Shawinigan.
Sophie and Caroline, thank you very much for accepting our invitation.

Sophie Tétrault-Martel: It's a pleasure. Thank you very much.

Émilie Pontbriand: First, to provide some context for how the movement emerged, tell us about the reality facing community organizations in Quebec. I'm also curious about how you viewed the community sector before you worked for a nonprofit, and what surprised you most.

Caroline Chartier: Well, to start, I think I'll talk a little about how I viewed the community sector before I began working in it.

I recently realized that I've already been working in the community sector for 20 years. Given my age, I can say that I've built my career in the sector. I can't say that it was a deliberate choice at first. It seems to have happened quite naturally. But my perception then—and still today—is that the people who work in the sector are filled with a kindness that is difficult to explain or even observe unless you pay attention to it. We connect directly with all kinds of vulnerability and hardship.

We serve people from birth to age 99. Is it exhausting? Yes. Are teams at the breaking point? Absolutely. Do we ourselves go through periods when our mental health is at risk? Absolutely. Do people take leave because of burnout? Yes. Are our working conditions and salaries attractive? Often, no—especially in many small organizations. The result is a level of exhaustion that has been building for years, and we have simply learned to live with it. I think each organization believed that it alone was experiencing this day-to-day stress.

We may have shared it with neighbouring organizations, but we didn't realize that the same conditions existed everywhere. I like to say that the hay was dry across Quebec—the conditions were ripe. Getting the Le communautaire à bout movement to catch fire can be quite difficult, because we all share the same reality. Needs are growing and the population is aging. Finding housing is difficult. Affording food is difficult. Psychological distress is widespread. And we are holding all of this together with the best of intentions and very little funding.

Sophie Tétrault-Martel: Absolutely. I would add something about how I viewed the community sector. Like Caroline, I've been in the sector for about 20 years. I first worked in the community sector as a student job, working with young people in parks. Later, even throughout my university studies, the community sector was always part of my life. I stayed in the sector for the same reasons Caroline mentioned: the connection we have with people and the direct, local work we can do with them every day.

You also discover extraordinary people working in the community sector, but with shoestring resources. In 20 years, I haven't seen conditions improve. Instead, working conditions have deteriorated, as has the situation of the people we serve. It was important to name that reality. I think the *Le communautaire à bout* movement allowed us to collectively name the anger and powerlessness we were feeling—and to turn that collective powerlessness into collective strength. It allowed us to put it before the public and regain the pride we should feel in working for community organizations.

Émilie Pontbriand: Absolutely. If I may, this reminds me of something we sometimes hear in our work at Imagine Canada: the idea that the passion driving us should be enough. But one doesn't cancel out the other. Being caring, passionate about our mission, and eager to help does not mean we don't deserve fair compensation. The work we do deserves a decent wage.

Imagine Canada has also analyzed Statistics Canada data on educational attainment in the nonprofit sector. Our workforce is more highly educated than the national average, yet our salaries are lower. So the movement's demands are entirely justified by this reality.

Caroline Chartier: It's as though, at some point along the way, we made a decision that I still don't understand. Because the community sector is staffed primarily by women, it's as though we decided that women driven by passion or a sense of vocation—like nurses, teachers, and early childhood educators—should be able to make do with their convictions and passion. But passion doesn't feed our children or pay the rent. Why should an executive in a private company earn a

more than decent salary while an executive with comparable responsibilities is expected to settle for so much less?

Something simply doesn't add up. I continue to believe that this was a choice made at some point.

Sophie Tétrault-Martel: We have completely normalized the exploitation of women through this idea of vocation. If we look at Quebec's history, religious communities once did much of the work of caring for the most vulnerable. We now have a welfare state and the means to invest in our social safety net, but the idea of vocation has never gone away. We are professionals, as you noted, both in terms of our education and our experience on the ground. Why shouldn't we be paid decently for supporting people in our communities?

Émilie Pontbriand: Absolutely. Focusing more specifically on the movement, you organized a series of coordinated actions in a short period of time. How did you manage to unite and mobilize organizations with very different mandates, across such a vast territory, when those organizations were already desperately short of resources? And what does the movement mean to the people involved?

Caroline Chartier: Yes, that's an interesting question. I'll talk a little about the history of the "Le communautaire à boutte" movement, because I've been involved since the beginning—before the movement even had a name. It all began in Shawinigan, a small city outside the major urban centres. We had just finished a forum on social justice and were standing in the parking lot, talking about the day we'd had, when two or three bold people asked: "Are we going to have to force ourselves to go on strike? Will the community sector have to shut down completely for people to see the impact we have? Is that the tool we're going to have to use?" There were only three of us, encouraging one another.

A few weeks later, we already had a demonstration planned, but in a completely different context. Someone dared to bring a sign that read, "The community sector is on strike." It certainly got a reaction, but not a positive one at first. There was considerable resistance. Little by little, we decided that, in Shawinigan, we would create a model: we would stop our services completely for an entire week to

demonstrate the impact to other regions of Quebec. We tried it. It was really a pilot project, and we had to be very nimble in managing communications and getting the media to report on what was happening in Shawinigan.

It quickly resonated with the regions around Shawinigan. People from Trois-Rivières, the Maskinongé region, and the south shore of Trois-Rivières joined us. At our first march, in October 2025, more than 1,600 people took part, even though it had been pouring rain for days. That showed us there was a real willingness to act. How did we spread the movement to other regions? Honestly, it was partly luck and partly determination. We're in 2026, and the technology exists for us to speak with someone in the Magdalen Islands and someone in Abitibi at the same time.

Those regions are extremely far apart, but it happened one small step at a time. We met virtually with staff teams and boards of directors, and word spread quite quickly. Every week, we received dozens and dozens of calls asking us to come speak. When it wasn't too far, we travelled there because meeting in person created a very different connection. But we were able to do all of this because technology made it possible. I'll let Sophie add to that, but what did people find within this movement? First and foremost, a sense of belonging.

As she said earlier, we did something we hadn't done in a very long time: we rediscovered our pride in working in the community sector. We also reminded ourselves that autonomous community action in Quebec includes mobilization. So why wouldn't we mobilize around our own working conditions? If we want to fight for social and climate justice, there still need to be people working in the community sector. We have to be able to offer decent and appealing working conditions. I think that's why the movement spoke directly to workers, most of whom are women.

Sophie Tétrault-Martel: That local dimension was essential. By the winter of 2026, the tour had taken place and the movement was growing into a province-wide initiative. During the two weeks of action, all 17 regions of Quebec were mobilized. As Caroline mentioned, technology allowed us to speak with one another and share advice, while also ensuring that the movement remained rooted

locally. Each area had a local organizing group. In Montérégie, for example, where I'm based, we had one in the Greater Longueuil area, another in Saint-Constant, and another in Saint-Hyacinthe.

Each city and region had a local representative who could speak with local media. It created a real snowball effect, and we shared advice with one another. We had group chats where we could share tools. That is what led to our two-week strike from March 23 to April 2. More than 1,900 organizations went on strike, culminating in our April 2 demonstration, when more than 10,000 people gathered in front of the National Assembly. We helped one another. We also acknowledged that, yes, we were all overloaded.

Yes, we were all overwhelmed. We were all at the breaking point—but we were at the breaking point together. Saying that gave us strength. We decided to focus on mobilization and on our working conditions so that we could continue providing services. If we don't mobilize, community services and organizations will close—and they will close permanently. Society as a whole will pay the price. A strike is also an ultimatum, an ultimate pressure tactic that says: “Look at what we do. If we no longer exist, look at what society will have to take on—and at the cost that will come with it.”

It is about placing that responsibility back on the government. That is what we wanted to do, and it is what we are still doing through the movement.

Émilie Pontbriand: The movement clearly emerged from tremendous solidarity across the sector. You mentioned the strike, which took place in the spring. In Canadian law, the word “strike” has a very specific meaning. How was your strike similar or different? And what did it change for the organizations and communities you serve?

Caroline Chartier: I would say, first and foremost, that what it changed was—again, we're repeating ourselves, but this is really what stands out—the solidarity, the determination to mobilize, the willingness to talk honestly about what was happening, and the ability to use strength in numbers. “Le communautaire à boutte” coordinating committee has continued to meet every

Tuesday for the past year and a half. We meet, exchange ideas, communicate, and create additional committees to continue those conversations. What was similar to a conventional strike was the work stoppage: most services closed for a week.

We were saying, “Look at what will be missing if we are no longer here.” What was different is that, from a union perspective, a strike is usually led by workers who stand up and challenge their working conditions. That was part of this movement, but in many cases the initiative also came from management and boards of directors, which authorized us to close our services. They were essentially saying: “We look at the numbers every month. This is no longer sustainable. We can’t improve your working conditions. So yes—go ahead, take to the streets. You have our permission.”

That made it very different from a union strike. I would also add that, as the movement continues to grow, we increasingly recognize the importance of naming it as a feminist struggle. We know that now, and others have pointed it out to us. Whatever we choose to call it, that is what it is. When a feminist struggle moves forward, society as a whole moves forward. We also have to own that part of it. Those are some of the distinctions I wanted to make between a conventional strike and the movement we are leading.

It’s also important to know that we hesitated for a long time before calling it a strike. We thought, “That word will scare people. We could call it a day of action.” Then we said, “No. Let’s own it. That is what this is, so let’s do it.”

Sophie Tétrault-Martel: There is also the legal dimension. When we talk about a labour strike, the Labour Code is very specific: it is defined and regulated by law. In our case, we describe it as a service strike. As you mentioned, Caroline, it is a feminist struggle, but it is also a strike with a broader social purpose because it seeks social change and a change in posture. Community organizations are taking to the streets, mobilizing together, creating openings, and standing up for themselves. We are coming together to voice our outrage loudly and clearly and to say that, no matter what happens, we will continue using pressure tactics.

That is also a form of collective social action. We saw it in the media coverage and in the support we received from different sectors—from unions, cities, and municipalities that backed our movement. There was a broader desire to stand up for community organizations, which are an essential link in our social safety net. Everyone recognized that during our two-week strike.

Émilie Pontbriand: In addition to the strike, what other actions have you taken? Looking at the strike and the other actions you implemented, are you satisfied with the results, or do you believe there is still a long way to go?

Caroline Chartier: There is definitely still a great deal of work to do. Beyond the pride, solidarity, and determination to mobilize—and beyond the strike itself—a great many things have happened. We met with political leaders at both the municipal and provincial levels, either to seek support or to gauge how willing they were to listen. Quebec will enter an election campaign in the coming weeks. We were interested not only in the position of the current government, but also in whether the other political parties running in the election were prepared to act. We therefore did a great deal of outreach.

The good news is that all of the opposition parties opened lines of communication. We were able to speak with them. We were told that our issues would be included in their election platforms, that there would be further meetings, and perhaps even some commitments. Unfortunately, the experience with the current CAQ government was completely different. We would have liked to make progress with the government currently in office, but that has not happened. Communication has been extremely difficult. During the strike, we said that we no longer wanted to deal with Minister Rouleau. Unfortunately, a few weeks later, Christine Fréchette reappointed Ms. Rouleau to the autonomous community action portfolio.

For us, that felt like a real slap in the face. It had two consequences: a long sigh of discouragement, followed by a collective sense that we had had enough of the disrespect. Our anger rose another notch. So we are preparing for what comes next. Nothing has been finalized yet, but we are preparing for this fall. There is one plan if the government changes and another if the CAQ returns to power. The intensity of our response will obviously be different.

Sophie Tétrault-Martel: Caroline, you've said it all.

Émilie Pontbriand: That's great.

For my next question, what message would you like to send to community-sector workers elsewhere in the country who are facing similar pressures and want to mobilize for change?

Sophie Tétrault-Martel: If “Le communautaire à boutte” movement can offer hope—the vision that, by mobilizing, we can become visible and change things—that is the message we would like to share. One thing we often say is that the movement belongs to us, and it belongs to you. It belongs to everyone who works in community organizations. Talking to one another, helping one another, standing in solidarity, and mobilizing together restores our pride and our collective power to act. We help others do that so often.

As a community worker, I support women every day as they reclaim their individual and collective power. We need to say the same thing to ourselves: that power also belongs to us. If we make gains—and we will, because the struggle will continue—we will be even better able to do our work and support people every day. The message we want to communicate is that mobilization is powerful, listening to one another is powerful, and experiencing moments of collective action together is incredibly powerful. But we have to take the risk.

Caroline mentioned that, at first, three or four of us were standing in a parking lot holding a sign with the word “strike” on it, and very few people wanted to join us. But through hard work, persistence, continued conversations, and popular education, we finally dared to do it. Daring to act is also part of autonomous community action and part of the daily work of community organizations. We have to dare if we want things to change.

Caroline Chartier: I just want to add that Sophie has given you two verbs that, to me, sum up everything: dare and believe. It is essential not to fall into the trap set by naysayers, because they are out there. Some people disagree. Some think it is

too intense. Others think it is not enough. Some watch from a distance and judge how things are unfolding. But as long as one person believes and can inspire the person next to them, there are suddenly two people who can inspire others.

As long as there is hope—as long as someone still believes and carries the torch—we can continue. There were moments of doubt; of course there were. But whenever two people had doubts, six others said, “No, this is going to work.” That is truly what happened, and it is what I wish for community organizations across the country. It is important to believe. We are here for the right reasons: to stand beside the people in our society who have been made most vulnerable.

If we want to keep doing that, we cannot be made vulnerable ourselves all the time. It doesn't work. At some point, we simply won't be able to keep going.

Émilie Pontbriand: Yes, absolutely. It makes me think about the importance of believing in our mission, but also believing that we can change things for ourselves. By improving our own conditions, we can make it easier to carry out that mission.

Looking to the movement's future, how do you see it evolving? What are your next steps?

Sophie Tétrault-Martel: Right now, our next steps centre on the Quebec election campaign this fall. We have an entire mobilization calendar. We will be especially active in September, meeting candidates in their communities and speaking with them about the movement. They heard about us in the spring, but the movement continues and we intend to keep making ourselves heard. We will hold a major province-wide demonstration in Trois-Rivières on September 15 to reaffirm our demands. Then, of course, there will be a new government on October 5.

Following the election, there will be a week of mobilization. Every October, we hold a week of autonomous community action to reaffirm our work and tell the government: “Look—we mobilized. Here are our demands. We now want concrete answers.” If we do not receive concrete answers, we are, first and foremost, a

movement that escalates pressure tactics toward a strike. There is a great deal of anger toward the current government right now.

We will remain mobilized no matter what happens. We will make sure our demands are heard and translated into concrete action.

Caroline Chartier: I would simply add that there is a clear escalation in the intensity of our actions. Last spring, we discussed the possibility of an unlimited strike, and that is still on the table. It will depend on which government is elected, what promises are made, and whether those promises are actually implemented. At this point, every scenario remains possible.

Émilie Pontbriand: You have mentioned hope several times. We always end our interviews with the same question, but I'd like to ask you on a more personal level. When you think about the state of the world and the challenges facing nonprofits—and about the challenges you encounter every day in your own work—what gives you hope?

Caroline Chartier: That is a really interesting question.

I feel that, in many ways, we have made progress as a society. We are getting better at living together. Can we celebrate that? Can we be proud of it? We are fortunate to live in Quebec, and we are fortunate to have an emerging generation of young people with wonderfully open minds. That is what gives me the most hope. When I look at our children, I see their openness toward newcomers and diversity. I find that magnificent. Things that made us uncomfortable a few years ago now feel completely natural to a great many young people.

I find that magnificent. It definitely gives me hope.

Sophie Tétrault-Martel: Building on what Caroline said about hope, what gives me hope is the level of mutual support and solidarity in our communities. Community organizations create solidarity at the local, neighbourhood level. Regardless of the social, climate, and housing crises we face, we welcome one another, experience that sense of powerlessness together, and name our anger. The

Le communautaire à bout movement gives me hope because it allows us to name our anger and transform it into action.

Anger can be a genuine driving force for action and mobilization. We have to make sure that...

Ultimately, it means that we no longer accept the unacceptable. We must never again accept the unacceptable; we must stand up. That gives me hope—both through the movement and through the direct, local work community organizations do every day.

Émilie Pontbriand: Channel your anger.

Yes, I love that. Thank you. Thank you very much. At Imagine Canada, we will continue following your work.

We fully support your demands, and we will continue amplifying your message.

Thank you both very much. I invite our listeners to visit the movement's website, about.info, to learn more. Caroline and Sophie, thank you.

Caroline Chartier: Thank you, Émilie.

Sophie Tétrault-Martel: Thank you so much.

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