
INTERNATIONAL
STUDENTS' DAY

17 NOW

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STUDENTS UNITE FOR CHANGE

Today, the **17th of November**, is a day to remember and celebrate student organising. This year we want to look back and thank students for their work, nonconformism and sacrifices for their rights but also the rights of each individual in their societies. This date reminds us of activism, commitment and solidarity, but also of injustice, oppression and blood. Unfortunately, the focus seems only to be put on this day when and where democratic crises are happening.

Czech students defied the Nazi regime 83 years ago, resulting in having them executed and around 1200 sent to concentration camps, which marked the 17th of November in our memory and calendars by establishing the International Students' Day. Fifty years later, again on a 17th of November, they started the revolution that meant the beginning of the end of the non-democratic, one-party government in Czechoslovakia. What could all students in the world achieve together? Maybe the Greek students could have overthrown the dictatorial military Junta they were demonstrating against in 1973 without having to wait one more year, or the White Rose resistance group wouldn't have had its leaders and supporters sentenced to death or imprisonment for fighting for freedom in Germany in 1943. We will never know, but we need to make sure that we don't wonder again in the future.

International solidarity has always been a key concept and a driving force in the student movements: in 1984 OBESSU and its members co-organised one of the biggest fundraising campaigns during the 12 years of civil war in El Salvador, one year after it was present during the Congress of South African Students supporting the fight against Apartheid by channeling funds and acting as a mediator with governments and in the same decade the organisation visited the occupied territories on the West Bank and Gaza Strip to work with and amplify the voice of students suffering human rights violations in Palestine.

Student movements have a long history of fighting on the frontline, not only for matters that concern education, but serving as a vanguard for larger social changes, civil and human rights, peace and democracy.

But, do you also have the feeling that students' space in the national and international political frame is shrinking and that the importance given to students' actions is decreasing? If you do, you are not alone.

It would be unfair to put the blame in students only. Even if there is space for self-criticism, who could blame students for struggling to find their place in the current political and activism panorama? The actions taken during and after the COVID pandemic sent the message that students were dispensable, educational and social spaces were hit the fastest and hardest, closures were not only rushed but extended ad infinitum and in a time of great need for these spaces and organisations, funds were cut instead of increased.

It is also understandable that students have a feeling that when they organise and start a movement, appropriation is behind the corner. Fridays for future is a great example of how the motivation and engagement of young people can drive change in society, but once again they have seen this platform being taken over by political parties, governments and other movements that used students and their efforts as yet one more tool to achieve their own objectives.

The sad truth is that there is always a threat to students and human rights somewhere in the world. The Russian aggression in Ukraine or the most recent developments, or the current situation in Iran, where thousands of students are trying to accelerate the change, are good examples of why the efforts of organised students are as needed as they have always been in history even if the legitimacy given to them by other political actors is decreasing.

We need to claim our space, and we need to do it now. Education is an extremely powerful tool to achieve it, by providing students with the necessary tools to understand political issues and act upon them. To know what a peaceful society looks like and how to build it. The same way that students are currently the driving force towards a sustainable world and freedom, these efforts should be extrapolated to issues that do not directly involve them as individuals but as human beings.