



Labour Day 2009

struggle changes everything **FREE**

We won! But did we do it right?

Reflections of an anarchist union organizer

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LINCHPIN

On July 31, 2009, Post-Doctoral Fellows at McMaster University became the first post-docs in Canada to form a union and win a contract. As a member of CUPE 3906, I was involved in this campaign first as an organizer and later, after the successful union drive, as a member of the bargaining support team. The following are my reflections on this campaign, written from the perspective of an anarchist worker and union member.

By the standards of most union organizers, this union drive was an all-out success. Besides breaking new ground for unions in a growing sector, the post-docs won significant gains including higher wages and benefits, more vacation time, paid leaves and professional development funds.

But as an anarchist I measure success in any social struggle not only by what was won, but also by how it was won. This is in keeping with one of anarchism's key principles: the means must match the ends. In the case of unions, anarchists want to see directly democratic unions controlled by their members. If our aim is to empower our co-workers to run their union, then anarchist union organizers must use methods which encourage workers to get involved and empower them to take matters into their own hands. Since anarchists want an equal and self-managed society (anarchism means "without rulers"), then our means of struggle must also be radically democratic, regardless how big or small the struggle.

So how does our post-docs campaign measure up by these standards? First, it should be said that from the beginning this was going to be a traditional union campaign meaning that workers would be asked to sign union cards and go through the formal legal process of joining a union and getting a first contract. While anarchists do not refuse to use these methods no matter the context, all would agree that they are not empowering. They encourage



only passive involvement of workers who are asked only to sign a card and later to vote. The campaigners and bargaining team take care of the rest only returning to the membership once a deal has been hammered out with management. A contract ties workers hands by taking away the right to withdraw labour during the course of the contract and channeling disputes into lengthy and legalistic grievance processes that do nothing to empower workers.

However, using mobilization and direct action in order to force the university to voluntarily recognize the union and its demands without going through the labour board and without a formal contract was

never an option. It was clear from day one that while the post-docs wanted a union, we were not dealing with a militant group of workers with a history of collective action. For the vast majority, this was their first experience coming together as workers to improve their working conditions. Given that a post-docs' career depends in a big way on keeping friendly relations with their supervisors, a confrontational approach was simply not in the cards. To refuse to compromise on my anarchist principles would have meant not participating in the campaign. This would have gone against another anarchist principle; that anarchists should be active in the struggles of our co-workers and neighbours at whatever

con't on back

About Us

Common Cause is an Ontario anarchist organization. We organize various educational events and aim to promote anarchist ideas within social movements. We publish the Linchpin paper as well as additional content online. Branches are currently active in Hamilton, Ottawa, Toronto and London. We welcome new members and alliances.

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level they happen to be at.

We did attempt to organize in a way that allowed the maximum involvement of post-docs and other rank-and-file members. This reflected the strong commitment to union democracy by the executive, staff and active rank-and-file members at CUPE 3906. The initial organizing committee was made up entirely of local members, most of them rank-and-file. This meant we had a rank-and-file run organizing committee allowing those involved to pick up a lot of organizing skills and union know-how. The bargaining team was similarly made up both executive and rank-and-file members including post-docs. The entire bargaining process, from determining priorities to deciding which ones to keep and which ones to compromise on, was open to all post-docs and other rank-and-file members. A great deal of effort was put in by an overstretched group of organizers and staff to encourage post-docs to take control of the process.

Despite these efforts, few post-docs chose to participate, although those that did had a big impact on the process. While we had their passive support (a majority voted to join the union, and they unanimously voted in favour of the final agreement), getting their active support was more difficult.

Overall it could be said that we attempted to organize in ways that empowered workers under difficult circumstances and within the restraints of a traditional union drive. Some of us were no doubt empowered in the process though our numbers were small compared to all the workers involved. So what lessons can be drawn from this experience for both anarchists and union organizers?

For anarchists, I think this campaign shows that when there is a low level of struggle, we must be flexible in our approach if we are to be active at all. There is nothing wrong with this provided that we never lose our principles

and never lose sight of our ultimate goal. Perhaps we can be guided by the following notion: compromise only when our weaknesses force us, never miss an opportunity to apply our principles where we are strong enough, and work really hard to overcome the areas where we are weak.

For other union organizers, I hope the lesson here is that we must pay as much attention to how we organize as to what we are fighting for, or rather, that the two things are directly connected. We cannot overcome the crisis of the labour movement simply by organizing more workers or by making more gains. If the labour movement is to once again become a fighting movement led by rank-and-file workers and their communities, we must organize daily in ways that encourage individual and collective empowerment.

anarchist discussion group

Anarcism 101

What is anarchism and what are some of the basic tenants. Who are some of the big thinkers and what are anarchism's historical roots. What does anarchism hope to do away with, and what will a future society look like. These questions and more will be explored.



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27 King William St, Hamilton

Sky Dragon Center
7pm

Hosted by Common Cause Hamilton

Workers Cooperatives: Possibilities and Limitations

Saturday September 19, 2009
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252 Bloor Street West, Toronto
Room 8-280

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