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Pissed Off Projectionists

Bringing The Class War To A Theater Near You!

Class Against Class (NEFAC-Boston)

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2003

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gained in the end, but the means for which these gains were made. What was particularly unique in our campaign, as compared to most other struggles for union recognition, was the fact that we were able to win primarily through direct action and community pressure rather than relying on the official channels of the State.

All the militancy in the world won't radicalize anyone if it isn't backed up by tangible victories. As anarchists arguing for self-organization and direct action in our struggles, we must be able to back up the talk with results. In order to build a mass base of support for anarchism, we need to be able to not only identify and express working class discontent, but also have the ability to fight for (and more importantly, win) material class gains using explicitly anarchist tactics and methods of organizing. Instead of attacking what we see as dead-end strategies from the comforts of our magazines or newsletter, we put our alternative strategies to the test. Our success laid in making our ideas relevant to our co-workers and the community. Hundreds of conversations in the workplace, in meetings, and on the picket line culminated in victory because we were able to explain, logically and in terms not filled with jargon, why we could win by striking, boycotting, etc. It wasn't always easy, but our persistence paid off. In end, we were successful in convincing fellow workers that our power exists at the point of production and in solidarity of our struggles, not in the courtroom.

The fact that we were able to develop working class relevancy for anarchism in our city is, in itself, an important victory.

Boston has a rich history of anarchism and class warfare. Unfortunately, at least until recently, the days of anarchist influence within labor struggles was exactly that: a relic of the past. The last time an anarchist had played an influential role in a successful Boston-based labor struggle was in 1938, when Rose Pesotta led a strike to organize over a thousand women dressmakers. Since then, anarchism has been defined mainly as a counter-culture or form of identity politics, with very little relevancy to the everyday struggles of the working class in this city.

Over the past few years anarchists in Boston have begun to retrace their class war roots by taking a more proactive approach to local labor struggles — mainly in the form of solidarity work. Recent labor disputes (NECCO factory workers, SEIU janitors, etc.) have seen principled support from the local anarchist community, whether it be solidarity on the picket line, benefits to raise strike funds, distributing strike literature, mobilizing people to attend rallies, or else taking direct action where unions are prevented from doing so themselves.

Labor solidarity, in and of itself, can be crucial in assisting class victories against the bosses. However, in terms of how much influence anarchists are able to have over strategies and tactics or overall direction of a given struggle, it can be limiting. After all, principled solidarity requires total respect for the self-activity of the direct participants — the rank-and-file workers — to determine their own means and ends during the course of a struggle. As anarchists we should be up front about our politics and prepared to argue for anarchist alternatives to the dead-end reformism and bureaucracy of traditional trade unionism. However, so long as we are providing solidarity for other workers' struggles, we should accept our role as outside supporters and not overstep our boundaries.

Earlier this year, a handful of us from NEFAC took our activity a step beyond supporting the struggles of others, and set out to organize our own workplace. For the first time in nearly seventy years

anarchist militants would be at the forefront of a class struggle in the Boston area, successfully leading a campaign for unionization using explicitly anarchist strategies, tactics, and methods of organizing. Although we are humble to the fact that our efforts fall far short of the scale and magnitude of Rose Pesotta's work with the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, we recognize that the success of the 'Pissed Off Projectionists' to organize workers at the Somerville Theatre represents an important turning point for class struggle anarchism in our city.

With A Workplace Like This, Who Wouldn't Be Pissed?

The story of the 'Pissed Off Projectionists' began over a year ago in Somerville, a traditionally blue-collar city just north of Boston. At the time, there were only two projectionists working at the local theater. Both were making minimum wage (\$6.75/hr), receiving no benefits, and consistently putting in 50-hour weeks. The projection booths were dimly lit, poorly ventilated, and extremely hot. Repeated pleas for equipment repairs, control over scheduling, or even minimal pay raises were consistently ignored, or else outright refused. To top things off, the boss had recently instructed the manager to hire more projectionists and cut back hours in an attempt to avoid overtime pay.

It was obvious that things could not get much worse, and conditions were certainly not improving under the new manager who had taken over in mid-summer. Even though the time seemed ripe for action, the opportunity quickly passed as new projectionists began to be hired, leaving those who were ready to fight back as a minority amongst question marks. Over the next few weeks, the original core of projectionists attempted to feel out their new co-workers, making a point to see how they reacted to low wages and piss poor working conditions that were all too familiar.

argue that our efforts only served to reinforce an institution that has become an integral component of the capitalist social order. Fair enough. As has been already stated, we share many of the anarchist and ultra-left criticisms of trade unions, and would agree that they are insufficient vehicles for future revolutionary activity. However, despite these criticisms we still consider trade unions to be important areas for the development of class-consciousness and struggle. For this reason alone, it is important for anarchists to develop a program for how we relate to these organizations and the workers who participate in them.

For as long as class exploitation has existed, workers have organized themselves into class defense apparatuses. From trade guilds to modern labor unions, workers' organizations have been at the forefront of the class struggle. When certain forms of defensive organization have proven themselves to be ineffective, new forms have emerged. The very nature of class struggle rests on the ability of the working class to be able to effectively resist the exploitation of the ruling class. We have a strong faith in the ability of workers to move beyond obsolete forms of class organization during advanced periods of struggle and develop new forms of revolutionary self-activity (such as councils or action committees) able to subvert the capitalist social order. But let's not fool ourselves. We are not there yet.

(3) Rhetoric and Reality

Militant rhetoric aside, it should be said that we never really pushed for demands beyond union recognition, basic workplace democracy, back wages and a fair contract. Okay, so we did not touch off a militant workplace occupation, or lead a workers' insurrection from the Somerville Theatre. No bosses were lined up and shot, no workers' soviets were established, and last we checked, the wage system was far from being smashed. However, the significance of this struggle was not necessarily in what was

The experiences we gained through our organizing at the Somerville Theatre only reinforce our support for industrial unionism. Industrial organizing, within the same location and sector, clearly affirms that a union is the sum of its workers. Trade unionism, which allows each location, profession, or sector to be represented by different unions, is an ideological construct that weakens class identification and solidarity. Functionally, trade unionism not only divides workers by skill, profession, or type, but it creates divergent interests among workers. It is most strategic for the employees of single boss to belong to the same union and that certain worker's gains must not be made at the expense of others.

The future for movie projectionists (ahem, motion picture technicians!) is one of uncertainty. With increasing levels of automation, the work has become much less of a skilled trade as compared to fifteen or twenty years ago. Gone are the days of carbon arc lamps, multiple film reels, and manual changeovers. Some of the larger corporate theaters are moving away from analog film projection altogether, in favor of digital, which will all but eliminate most of the work currently preformed by projectionists. A sharp decline in union membership and increasingly weaker contracts for projectionists in recent years only confirms this trend.

Beyond the theoretical arguments to be made in favor of industrial unionism, our very future as projectionists will depend on our ability to organize beyond our craft and build a strong union that embodies all theater workers. You can bet that a long-term goal of the 'Pissed Off Projectionists' will be to fight for an industrial organizing strategy within our union.

(2) The Union Makes Us Strong?

Although we were able to effectively challenge certain tactical orthodoxies employed by trade unions, we never posed a serious challenge to trade unionism as such, and ultimately some would

By the end of the summer, there appeared to be some promise amongst the group, but the time was not right to pop the question. Further hirings and firings in the fall and winter changed the complexion of the workforce once again. This high turnover rate appears to be typical of "independent" movie theatres that take advantage of young and inexperienced workforces. All too often, these small corporations can be the most exploitive, and they take full advantage of the reluctance of younger workers to be involved in workplace struggles (a reluctance that represents, at least in part, a reflection of the larger disconnect between organized labor and young workers).

It should be said that the nature of the projectionist trade tends to attract some fairly interesting characters: film students, punks, social misfits, etc. The Somerville Theatre was no different, and, unfortunately for our boss, as open positions began to be filled by personal recommendations by one of the original projection workers, almost half of the projectionists would now be revolutionary anarcho-communists. Suddenly the prospects for organizing in the workplace became much more interesting. With a solid core now in place, the process of organizing would soon be in full swing.

Trade Unionism vs. Workplace Resistance Group: Bridging A False Dichotomy

Before moving forward with the organizing campaign and actually seeking out representation from a union, there were many important political and strategic discussions to be had amongst ourselves. Those of us who identified as anarcho-communists obviously had strong criticisms of trade unionism (and still do!), and acknowledged the potential for compromising ourselves if we were to uncritically embrace an orthodox trade union strategy.

At the most basic level, joining a union implies that workers have different interests from the boss. Unions have traditionally

acted as defensive organizations for working people under capitalism, and in the best of times (that is, during periods of heightened class struggle) have maintained an antagonistic relationship to capitalist social relations by posing a direct challenge to the interests of the ruling class.

Unfortunately, the reality of the labor movement today is one of compromise, and often collaboration, with capitalist exploitation. Instead of acting as defensive organizations, unions play the role of business organizations that negotiate the sale of their member's labor power to employers. They seek a fairer form of exploitation under capitalism, rather than an end to capitalist exploitation itself. Most unions are structured as a top-down hierarchy, with unaccountable bureaucrats calling the shots from above, often restricting the self-activity of the rank-and-file membership. This bureaucratic stranglehold, along with years of backward labor legislation, has led to labor unions often becoming roadblocks for serious class conflict in North America, rather than fulfilling their historic role as effective vehicles for class struggle.

However, unions still represent the largest organized pole within the working class, and like any mass organization, it is essential for anarchists to develop a program for how our activity relates to them. The issue is not whether unions are revolutionary, but rather how we as anarchists work within unions towards a revolutionary end.

It should be noted that the labor movement in the United States is currently a shell of what it once was, with only a fraction of its former membership strength (in 1958 nearly 39% of the private sector was unionized, as compared to 2000 where membership fell to under 9%... the lowest level since 1902!). But, after a long retreat, there now seems to be something of a progressive shift within the labor movement. An increasing number of unions have embraced, at least to some extent, experimental forms of organizing and a strengthening of rank-and-file democracy. This leaves in-

(1) Challenging the Elitism (and Class Isolation) of “Skilled Labor”

One aspect of the campaign that should be criticized is the fact that, despite repeated attempts, we were unable to connect our interests with the interests of “unskilled” concession workers, and thereby failed to unify all theater workers in a generalized struggle against the boss. Incidentally, we were also equally unsuccessful at linking up with fellow workers (including projectionists) from a sister theater owned by the same boss.

In our particular situation there were a number of factors that led to this failure. For starters, the very nature of our work as movie projectionists is one of isolation. Even pulling together meetings with fellow projectionists proved to be a difficult task, as we rarely saw one another during shift changes. For obvious safety reasons, a licensed projectionist is supposed to be on hand at all times while films are showing. During our shifts we are not allowed to leave the projection booth for more than a few minutes at a time, so our ability to talk with fellow workers in other parts of the theater was obviously very minimal. A passing comment against the boss or the pay conditions while getting a soda refill was pretty much the extent of our ability to agitate among the concession workers.

Other factors included issues of age, experience, turnover rate, and most importantly, trust. Many of the concession workers at the Somerville Theatre (like most theaters) were young, and had little job experience. For some, working the concession counter or taking tickets was merely a summer job until the school year started, and they had little invested interest in the long-term conditions of the workplace. The bottom line for any workplace organizing campaign is trust in your fellow workers. The fact that we were unable to build a solid relationship with any theater workers outside of the projection booth meant that trust could not be established, and therefore we could not risk bringing them in on our plans to unionize before we went public with the campaign.

A trip out to the boss's posh little neighborhood to post some nice little 'Wanted' fliers (for union busting, poverty wages, etc.) took place the next day.

Well, it turns out that there was a bit of miscommunication between our lawyer, the union rep, and us, and the negotiations were actually going to resume after a two-day break. Oh well, we thought it was a good idea to put the heat back on. Despite the boss's claims that this was the last straw, our willingness to go on the offensive at the drop of a hat, made us look like rabid dogs not to be toyed with (as our lawyer put it). Negotiation did in fact resume and within a couple of days we emerged victorious with both union recognition and a two-year contract. Under the current contract, the starting wage for projectionists is now in accordance with (and fixed to) the Somerville Living Wage Ordinance (currently \$9.55/hr), which is a 40% increase; all full-time employees will be offered health benefits and vacation; and most importantly, the Somerville Theatre is now a 'union shop' for projectionists, which allows for more control over the work environment by the workers themselves and preference for hiring new employees in the hands of the union.

Class War Conclusions

On the surface, the success of our organizing campaign represents an incredible modest class victory. Although any victory of workers over a boss is significant in its own way, there is nothing to be gained by inflating the importance of this particular struggle. Now that it is over, and the dust has settled, it is in order that we look back and evaluate certain aspects of our activity with critical honesty.

Interesting possibilities for class struggle anarchists who are serious about building militant rank-and-file workers' movements.

Aside from the theoretical arguments to be made in regards to unionism, there were also some very real factors to be taken into account in our situation. We eventually agreed that, at least in terms of a long-term strategy, it made the most sense to join an established projectionists' union. However, there were serious contradictions that needed to be addressed. All unionized theaters in the Boston area are organized through the International Alliance of Theatrical and Stage Employees, a very conservative trade union affiliated with the AFL-CIO. Historically, this union was formed under the pretext of "combating the socialistic tendencies of industrial unionism" and from there only got worse. Red baiting, black listing, and mob ties were all standard features for this union at one time, and an air of conservatism still reigns to this day.

For us this was almost too much to swallow. But, after holding our noses and doing some further research, we eventually warmed up to the idea of organizing through IATSE. Most important for us was the fact that, despite the overt conservatism on an international level, the actual structure of the union allows for a high level of autonomy and independence for the locals. Also, the particular local we would be dealing with (Motion Picture Operators' Local 182) had suffered a serious defeat the previous year after a severe labor dispute with Loews Cinemas. With relatively few resources, no paid organizers, and the recent defeats, the local seemed very open to a self-managed campaign using experimental forms of organizing.

So, it was agreed. Officially we would be organizing under IATSE Local 182. But, having made this decision, a few of us went a step further and decided to organize ourselves into a workplace resistance group ('Pissed Off Projectionists'), so as to better be able to coordinate our activities as an explicitly radical pole within what we considered to be a limiting trade union framework. We felt this to be necessary for a number of reasons:

(1) Independence and Self-Activity

As anarcho-communists, we believe very much in the necessity of pushing struggles as far as possible, so as to not only challenge the immediate exploitive relationship between ourselves and our employer, but to challenge the systematic class exploitation embodied within capitalism as a whole. The very nature of trade unionism is one of class mediation within the existing system, making it insufficient as a vehicle for systematic challenge. It is only through the revolutionary self-activity of the working class that isolated class struggles can be generalized into a genuinely anti-capitalist movement, and in order to achieve this we must continue to build forms of self-organization that are able to go beyond existing trade union structure. (How's that for some dense theoretical reasoning?)

On a more practical level, let's face it, there will be periods of class conflict where rank-and-file workers will need to be prepared to fight not only the bosses in the workplace, but also the union bureaucrats who seek to hold them back (and often sell them out). Why wait for the inevitable to happen before establishing alternative structures within the existing union body? It is important for radical workers to band together in order to effectively assert themselves among the rank-and-file, and create a "dual power" relationship with the official union leadership.

(2) Militancy

The most crucial aspect of independence is how you exercise it in action. Trade unions are very much bound by existing labor laws, and limited in their ability to take effective action against employers. They can be sued for libel or slander; they are unable to call for secondary boycotts, and any form of direct action that crosses the line of legality is obviously out of the question. A workplace resistance group has no such legal dilemma, as it is not a legally recognized body, has no financial assets, and is not accountable to

Negotiating Victory

After two months of sustained pickets, an effective boycott, hundreds of phone calls of support for our demands, and the total failure of an attempt to red-bait us, the boss finally agreed to sit down at the negotiating table. However, we quickly learned that his anti-red sentiment would cloud the whole process. It was clear that, in no way, did he want to negotiate with "the anarchists".

Once we were at the table, the process was not moving along in a positive direction, and threats of closing the theater were repeatedly made. It appeared that we were heading for a rather nasty stalemate until a last-ditch option presented itself. We had become such a thorn in the side of the boss that he could barely mutter names without losing it. The 'Pissed Off Projectionists' and the union had now become separate entities in his mind. The concerns over having a unionized workforce became secondary to him compared to the campaign unleashed by "the anarchists". He wanted us gone one way or another. After much debate, the 'Pissed Off Projectionists' agreed that we would step aside as a gesture of solidarity with our co-workers and take employment through other theaters represented by IATSE if it would ensure union recognition and a fair contract for the others.

The idea was discussed and negotiations began to look hopeful by the end of the week. We agreed, after much prodding from our lawyer, to call off our pickets as a show of good faith. However, when everyone reconvened on Monday things took a turn for the worse. It looked like we were back to the same stalemate, and talks were put off again. We discussed the state of affairs with our union rep and came to the conclusion that the owner had pulled out of the negotiating process. If this was the boss's decision, then it would be all out war from our end. Within hours we began to publicize that the regular picketing schedule was back on and that a "Rally Against Union Busting" co-sponsored by Jobs With Justice and the Central Labor Council was going to take place the next weekend.

took a statement from us), our boss used them as a pretext for red-baiting certain projectionists who they deemed the leading agitators in the organizing campaign. After some investigation, the boss's lawyer determined that a handful of us were "dangerous anarchists" and began compiling information packets which were sent to local politicians, our union, and who knows where else. Each packet contained an extensive collection of police records, published writings, and print outs from the NEFAC website. Any references to workplace organizing, anti-capitalism, or direct action (especially sabotage) were highlighted in an attempt to somehow connect the locked-out projectionists with the recent vandalism at the theater and dismiss the organizing campaign as "political trouble-making".

Unfortunately for our boss, by this time our politics were already fairly well known, and no one was especially fazed by the information contained in the packets. Obviously our union was concerned as to whether or not we knew anything about the windows, but once it was established that we had absolutely no knowledge of these actions, nothing else was ever said of it. Aside from our immediate supporters, our boss's attempts at discrediting the organizing campaign through red-baiting completely backfired with local politicians as well. On June 12th, the Somerville Board of Aldermen responded by passing a resolution unequivocally supporting the locked-out projectionists. One local politician who spoke at a public rally in support of the locked-out projectionists went even further, publicly condemning the "disgusting red-baiting tactics" used by our boss to try and defame our struggle. She ended by stating that "all workers, including anarchist workers, have a right to join a union and fight for a living wage in the city of Somerville".

anyone outside of the workers directly involved in a given workplace. Slow-downs, sabotage, sick-ins, non-cooperation, unsanctioned pickets, anti-boss actions, and direct action against scabs should all be on the table as possible tactics to be used during labor disputes, and it is through workplace resistance groups that such tactics can be carried out and applied to a larger strategy for developing workers' autonomy.

(3) Political Identity

We accept that conscious anarchists are an extreme minority within working class movements today. But we feel strongly enough about the validity of our ideas to actively build support for them. Traditionally, anarchism has been a fighting ideology that developed through class struggle, and we believe that anarchism still has a lot to offer the labor movement in terms of strategy and vision (direct action, self-management, rank-and-file democracy, mutual aid, etc.). Throughout the duration of our organizing campaign at the Somerville Theatre it was important for us to be honest about our political affiliations. We wanted to win using explicitly anarchist tactics and strategies, and we wanted to do so in a tactful, yet very public, way. Basic propaganda-through-example. However, we had to use caution in how closely these affiliations were linked directly to our union. This was another area where it was important for us to be able to coordinate our activities semi-autonomously.

What was interesting in our particular campaign was how easily the lines between seemingly contradictory forms of organizing became blurred and developed into a highly effective labor strategy. Official representation from an AFL-CIO trade union certainly gave our struggle a sense of legitimacy in the eyes of the larger labor community, which was extremely important (ex: unionized UPS drivers would not cross our picket line to make deliveries). Also, we had access to legal protection that would otherwise have

been unavailable to us. Fighting it out in labor court with our boss was hardly the road we wanted to take, but it was definitely to our benefit to have a union lawyer able to file 'unfair labor practice' suits, challenge the legality of hiring unlicensed scabs to run the projectors, and eventually negotiate a fair contract on our behalf. This helped to keep our boss constantly on the defensive and allowed us to sustain an aggressive fight and keep the upper hand at all times.

While this was all taking place, those of us from the 'Pissed Off Projectionists' were more or less left to ourselves and given a free hand in running the day-to-day aspects of the campaign. We organized our own pickets, rallies, leafleting and phone actions. We developed our own support networks, distributed our own propaganda, and maintained our own public relations. Towards the end of the campaign, when negotiations began to break down, because of the semi-autonomous nature of our organizing we were able to step up the antagonism against our boss in a big way and eventually pushed him to the point that he agreed to cave on practically all the union's demands so long as he would be free of the anarchist menace! (More on that later).

From The Projection Booth To The Picket Line

During the early meetings with the union rep from IATSE, it was clear that they wanted us to follow a 'traditional' path to unionization. This would entail filing for an election with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) once a majority of the workforce had signed cards for representation, waiting at least 42 days, then voting at an election that would take place at the theater. On the surface, this tactic sounds like a straightforward, safe bet, but there are many other factors that generally come into play in the real world.

Anarchists In The Workplace

From the start, we always made a point to be open with our politics. To be honest hardly anyone seemed very shocked by the fact that we were anarchists (including members of IATSE). Anarchists or not, it hardly made a difference to most of our working class supporters, so long as we were giving the bosses hell on the picket line. And why should it? Many of them have just as much disgust for politicians, bosses, rich people and the general state of the world as we do! I doubt that any of us will forget a retired ironworker in his seventies who said, "Every workplace could use a few anarchists to ensure that the boss gets an ass kicking every now and then."

However, about midway through the lock-out, a series of events took place which led to our anarchist politics being placed center stage by our boss. On two separate occasions the windows at the Somerville Theatre were smashed in, resulting in thousands of dollars in damages. Were any of the projectionists involved in these actions? Absolutely not. Our activity was focused on building community support and applying public pressure on our boss to end the lockout and recognize the union. If any of the projectionists could have been connected with illegal activities against the theater it would have been grounds for immediate lawful termination. We were certainly not going to give our boss that satisfaction. Whether or not some of our supporters carried out these actions on our behalf was completely unknown to us. Nor did we care. Our basic position was that it was the theater's problem, not ours, and although we did not necessarily advocate for such tactics to be used on our behalf, we certainly weren't going to condemn them either. Every action has a reaction, and if an illegal lockout by our boss resulted in anonymous acts property destruction to his theater, so be it. Welcome to the class war.

Although the theater never attempted legal action against any of the locked-out employees for these actions (indeed, despite their now constant presence at our daily pickets, the police never even

atre. We were successful in convincing Jonathan Richman to cancel an upcoming performance and received promises from other artists and promoters that they would not return until the dispute was resolved.

Being members of NEFAC, an anarchist federation that spans the northeast of the US and Canada and has ties to the international anarchist movement, also had its perks. On a regional level, members were able to publicize our struggle in their respective cities and unions, put together strike fund benefits, and most importantly, offer strategic advice. Calls to the boss flooded in from throughout the region (and some from halfway across the globe!), and letters of solidarity arrived from a variety of North American unions (including a rather memorable one from the Canadian Auto Workers) and internationally from anarcho-syndicalist comrades affiliated with the CNT-Vignoles (France) and FAU (Germany), among others.

On the picket line, we began to form solid ties with other union members, activists, and most notably, members of the surrounding blue-collar community. Folks would stop by on their lunch break to share a story about an angry phone call they made to the owner, talk about their own union experience, offer advice, or just ask about what was going on. Often conversations would go beyond our strike, and people would discuss issues such as gentrification of the area, or the weakening economy, or how much of an asshole they thought George Bush was. Older folks, having seen the past gains of labor movement wither away during their lifetime, were enthusiastic over seeing a new generation of workers getting involved and essentially carrying on where their generation left off. This strong showing of solidarity we received would lead to larger and larger rallies (special thanks to Jobs With Justice), keep our spirits up, undermine the boss's red-baiting attempts (see below), and eventually land us at the negotiating table.

According to NLRB statistics, only half the elections filed result in a victory for the union. As a result, it is becoming increasingly popular for unions to seek card-check neutrality agreements and other alternative methods of recognition. The most glaring reason for the failure of the NLRB route is the lengthy opportunity it opens for the employer to run an anti-union campaign, stick-and-carrot style. Employees can be psychologically and physically harassed (a tactic that could be easily used in an isolated projection booth with only one worker on at a time) or fall for false promises and bribes. In addition, the whole process can be dragged out indefinitely with litigation. Facing an employer with a reputation for being rabidly anti-union, this was a scenario that we wanted to avoid. However, these concerns were not our main reasons for wanting to take an alternative strategy.

If anything radicalizes, it's a hard-fought struggle that results in victory. Even if we were to win through an NLRB election, it is hard to say what exactly would be won. Without a real fight and the opportunity to show what we were made of as an organized workforce, the prospects for fruitful contract negotiations would be dim. We would remain untested, unaware of our capabilities, and lacking the experience to know where our power lies. In sum, the NLRB process largely divorces those involved from the possibility of engaging in tactics that directly impact the day-to-day operations of the boss and truly change the balance of power.

By the time we got it together to unionize it was obvious that a majority of the workforce was pissed. There was little fear in losing our jobs because most of us figured the conditions could not be all that much worse in other theaters. Things had to change and we were ready to make it happen. We began meeting independently of the union rep to discuss our options, and then something happened that forced us into action. It was announced that the Independent Film Festival of Boston would take place at the Somerville Theatre from May 1-4. For us, this meant about five times as much work, for four days, at the same shit pay. It was all sprung upon us on

very short notice and definitely the last straw. We met once again and came up with a plan. We would pressure our boss into voluntarily recognizing the union, or else we would strike on May Day! Naturally, the union was opposed to this because it was outside of the normal course of action. When told, “You can’t just walk out”, we replied, “We’re the workforce. We can walk out. It’s a question of whether or not you’re going to support us.”

The risks of striking for recognition were not lost on us. We were aware that any scab could be told that they were being hired as a ‘permanent replacement’ and they could legally take our hours in a post-strike period. There was also the chance that one of the pro-union projectionists could get cold feet at the last minute and scab on us. However, in our eyes, the positives outweighed the potential negatives. The film festival appeared to present a great starting point for the campaign. We would walk out and begin a campaign of direct action, with the majority of the projectionists now free to devote all of their energies in struggle against the boss.

On the night of April 30th, the demand for union recognition was presented to the manager along with a strike deadline of 6pm the next day. Although it was entertaining to watch the manager lose his shit, fumble his words, and threaten us with termination, we would have to wait for the final say from the boss, who is rarely present at the theater. The next day the union lawyer received a message that voluntary recognition would not be granted, and the strike was on. It should be noted that we agreed to allow the union rep to simultaneously file an NLRB election, even though we had no faith in this process. This was for the purposes of tying our boss up with legalities (for instance, you cannot legally fire striking workers or offer financial incentives to scabs after an NLRB election has been filed), and allowing ourselves some space to be able to more effectively plan for a nasty and prolonged fight on the picket line. We also filed reports with the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and the Department of Health for good measure.

Utilizing our existing networks from years of activism, email, word of mouth, and independent media we were able to turn out at least seventy-five people for the picket line on the first night. There was a high level militancy that evening, with a lot of the support coming from a cross-section of local anarchists (NEFAC, BAAM!, IWW, etc.). The night was marked with scuffles with the cops (shoving, de-arrests) and shouting matches with wannabe Hollywood stars and hipsters who were inconvenienced by our picket line. Those who honored the picket line were mostly blue collar Somerville residents who, incidentally, make up a large chunk of the theater’s business throughout the year. The festival would go on, thanks in large part to the free scab workforce brought in by the festival organizers, but the groundwork would be laid for a sustainable economic boycott and a long-term campaign of direct action.

If we were to win, it would require the ability to adapt to the many twists and turns of the campaign. In the days following the film festival we would make our next tactical move by unconditionally offering to return to work. During the course of a strike, so long as an NLRB election was filed there is a 30-day window during which the employer is legally required to take back any employee that offers to return. Having no other choice, the management agreed to take us back in theory, but, as expected, we were never put back on the schedule. Fine by us, because now our campaign would officially be transformed into a lockout. This would eventually result in back pay for all the locked-out projectionists, and more importantly, it would prevent the hiring of more scabs. In addition, the words “locked out” seemed to add weight to our call for a boycott.

Week after week, we tirelessly walked the picket line, held weekend rallies, and handed out thousands of leaflets. It’s hard to say exactly how many people honored our boycott, but attendance appeared to be half of what it normally was. In addition to turning away would-be patrons, we began to contact promoters and artists scheduled to have live performances at the Somerville The-