

Class Struggle Against Borders In Ontario

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Much has been made in recent social theory of the “flow” across borders supposedly characterizing the age of globalization. Even left social activists have been drawn to emphasize mobility and the supposed permeability of borders. For example, one activist and academic inspired by the works of Gramsci and Freire, suggests, perhaps hopefully, that “the complex process of globalization that has increasingly decentralized production and centralized decision-making has diminished the importance of borders and of the nation-states within them” (Barndt, 1996: 243). New technologies, most notably the internet, are credited with facilitating global communications and global networks of anti-capitalist activism. These networks have, in turn, facilitated a move beyond the nationalism which characterized earlier struggles such as those against free trade.

The imperialist response to September 11th, of course, smashed much of that hope. At the same time the bold exposure of the truly imperialist nature of globalization sharply reminds us that struggles against borders, rather than diminishing, are perhaps the key struggles of our times. Borders, and specifically state control of borders to free the transfer of capital while determining the movement of workers, maintain and extend processes of exploitation and oppression.

FIGHTING RACIST IMMIGRATION PRACTICES IN CANADA SINCE SEPTEMBER 11th

September 11 offered an excuse to openly display the cruel forces of xenophobia and racism which are ever present, if often denied, features of Canadian society¹. Among the institutions feeding those renewed forces is the Federal government with its zealous focus on “security” and manic obsession with the phantom of permeable borders. In an effort to show its allegiance to US world order the Canadian government has entered into discussions around joint agreements around border security and immigration controls up to and including the creation of a security perimeter around North America, a “Fortress North America.”

Until being invited to join the US Forces in violating the Geneva Convention, Canada’s hawks have had to satisfy their war cravings through such maneuvers on the “home front.” The reality is that the “home defense” has already claimed its share of casualties, however these might be explained away by the usual apologists as “collateral damage.”

A microcosm of the dangers facing us in this epoch are painfully illustrated in the recent experiences of three of our neighbors who have been set upon by Canadian Immigration: Irma Joyles, Brenda Lyn MacDonald and Shirley-Ann Charles. Despite each woman having lived in Canada for many years, working, attending school and raising families, immigration authorities have targeted them for deportation without hearings. In order to avoid having to make the awful choice between leaving her child behind without her only support or bringing her to a climate which will worsen her health, Irma has filed a Humanitarian and Compassionate claim. Brenda, facing a similar impossible choice, has also filed Humanitarian and Compassionate claim. Unfortunately, on Monday, November 26, with no hearing at all, Shirley-Ann was deported.

According to Canadian immigration policy all three women were entitled to have Humanitarian and Compassionate claims heard. Instead, without explanation, officers were sent to

¹ While this article has a post-September 11th focus I do not want to imply that the actions taken by the Canadian government since then are out of character. Canada’s immigration system has always been racist, anti-worker and anti-poor.

Brendalyn's home to arrest her. In this time of war increased "security" apparently means that government can remove women without notice or hearing. Poor immigrants and refugees now stand without rights to due legal process. Prior to September 11th none of these women would have been targeted and pursued with such viciousness. It is likely that because they have children, homes and jobs they would not even have been investigated.

In addition to increased harassment and threats of deportation, are the frightening numbers of people who have been detained in Toronto jails and detention centres, often in solitary confinement. People have been denied access to sanitation and medical care and hearings often occur by video link. At the notorious Celebrity Inn, a motel near Pearson International Airport used as a detention center, families are split up. Full information about people detained since September 11th has yet to be disclosed despite the efforts of groups such as Anti-Racist Action and Colors of Resistance.

Among the groups which have determined not to allow these practices continue and intensify is the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP). OCAP has been at the forefront of developing new, creative and effective ways of dealing with government agencies which target for mistreatment those who are deemed to be vulnerable. One of the most successful practices pioneered by OCAP is "direct action casework." Unlike more hierarchical "client/caregiver" forms of casework, direct action casework directly involves the people facing injustice allowing them to determine what course of action to take. Unlike more passive forms of casework, direct action casework goes directly to the source of injustice, whether a welfare office, landlord or immigration office, mobilizing large numbers of community members (neighbors, students, unionists, activists) to get whatever is needed.

Over the years, this approach has been highly successful winning such tangible benefits as welfare and disability checks, wheelchairs, rent refunds and even stays of deportation. In three years OCAP has supported over 50 families with immigration work.

Despite being a movement made up primarily of poor people, unemployed worker and homeless people, OCAP has been a pole of attraction for struggles against local regimes of neoliberal global governance. Through direct actions, rank-and-file militance and community organizing based on a sense of working class unity, OCAP has provided an impetus for a recomposition of class struggle forces across the borders which keep our class so divided.

Finally, in early May, 2002, Brendalyn McDonald received a favorable decision on her application to apply for permanent residence. This was a major victory and came only after months of fighting the deportation order by Brendalyn, her family and allies. OCAP's efforts, including written correspondence and phone calls, small and large scale actions, the mobilization of unions and drawing media coverage, were critical in this victory and show the type of work that needs to be done to fight off government attacks.

IMMIGRATION AND LABOR POLICIES

Racial and economic profiling maintains the system of divide and conquer which allows bosses and governments to play sectors of the working class against each other. It is part of longstanding practices which drive wages down and prevent opposition movements from forming.

The unequal distribution of rights ensured by state definitions of citizen, immigrant, refugee or "illegal" serve the interests of capital in several ways. At the same time these differential

categories harm workers across the board. First, the limitation of political or legal rights on the basis of birthplace makes people vulnerable and open to intimidation and extreme exploitation. Denial of social benefits such as welfare, disability benefits and unemployment benefits ensures a precarious workforce willing to take on undesirable or dangerous work and less able to organize for better conditions. Differential categories of citizenship also serve as markers of difference separating workers.

Workers have to get past the racist anti-immigrant hysteria, so readily manipulated by bosses and politicians, to recognize that immigrants are not the cause of the social ills of capitalism. Poverty, violence and unemployment are standard outcomes of capitalist production for profit.

Immigration is the movement of people affected by that exploitation. Poverty and unemployment result from the capitalist structuring of work which sees some work 60-hour weeks while others are left without work. In reality, the ills of capitalism can only really be alleviated when those affected by exploitation, employed and unemployed, immigrants and non-immigrants, embrace each other in solidarity to defend against exploitation. This should be initiated by organized labor and will require that organized labor work to overcome the nationalism which has driven much of labor politics in Canada.

This sort of working class cooperation, especially in this global age of capital movement across all borders, is necessary for a real defense of our neighbors and communities. Conversely, the strengthening of the state's powers and the tightening of border controls only works to tear apart our communities.

FLYING SQUADS AND LABOR UNITY

In early September, 2001, OCAP along with allies in Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 3903 flying squad went directly to Pearson International Airport to demand an end to threats of deportation against the three families. Leaflets were given to passengers alerting them to the situation and a visit was paid to the Immigration Canada deportation office in the basement of Terminal One. OCAP demanded and received a meeting with the airport's immigration management and gave a deadline of the end of the business day for management to issue stays of removal in all three instances. All three deportations were eventually cancelled. This unusual result, in which the removal dates were cancelled prior to a Federal Court challenge, is a testament to the powers of direct action.

It must also be stressed that the presence of the flying squad was crucial in the success of this action. The flying squad, a decentralized group of rank-and-file activists on-call to support strikes, demonstrations or casework actions, demonstrates how labor organizations can step out of traditional concerns with the workplace to act in a broadened defence of working class interests. The expansion of union flying squads, with autonomy from union bureaucracies, could provide a substantial response to the state's efforts to isolate immigrants and refugees from the larger community. CUPE 3903 has also formed an Anti-Racism Working Group and, as an initiative of anarchist members and OCAP supporters, an Anti-Poverty Working Group to work hand-in-hand with OCAP on actions or cases. These are just a few of the efforts that organize labor can undertake in the here-and-now to build a global network of solidarity and support in which more secure members of the working class work contribute to the defense of less secured

members². Anarchists in unions can, as in the case of the Anti-Poverty Working Group take these initiatives into their unions. The emboldened aggressiveness of Immigration Canada after September 11th make such actions in defence of innocent people much more pressing, as the case of Shirely-Ann Charles shows with frightening clarity.

There is more that unions could do. In the Netherlands, pilots can refuse, as a health and safety issue, to transport people who have been deported. This is something which should be implemented in airline unions in North America. Instead of refusing to attend the Pearson action, as they did, the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW), which represents many airline workers, could have used the opportunity to discuss the issue with their members as a first step in actively pursuing such a policy

A NEW UNDERGROUND RAILROAD?

These emerging circumstances of increased repression against immigrants and refugees mean that unions and social movements must develop much more thorough and advanced strategies for support. Labor needs to organize outside of the limited confines of collective bargaining and the workplace to build networks of class-wide support. This must include support for unemployed workers, poor people, injured workers, immigrants and refugees among others. In effect these networks should form the basis for a new underground railroad which can secure safe travel across borders for people seeking to flee economic exploitation or political repression. As in the original underground railroad, this new network must be ready to operate outside of legal authorities. While community organizations can be expected to play a part in this, only organized labor has the resources to make this an effective and ongoing practice. Labour can help to provide transportation, safehouses and even employment, all of which will be necessary.

Of course labor must work fundamentally against the statist categories of citizenship which arbitrarily grant workers differential political and legal rights. As long as these citizenship categories exist bosses will continue to use “illegal” labor for their own purposes. As long as there are vulnerable and hyper-exploitable categories of workers capital will be able to use these differences against workers. Illegal workers will still be subject to harsher working conditions at lower pay without social benefits. Legal precariousness will always be a mechanism for exploiting those workers who find themselves in such a situation. Thus labor must not stop at helping the movement of illegal workers but must fundamentally work to abolish those practices which make anyone illegal. As European movements have stated: “No One Is Illegal.”

Bosses have established free movement for themselves through free trade deals and other legal mechanisms while simultaneously working to limit the movement of workers. This works to their benefit by allowing them to pursue low wages and weak environmental regulations while limiting workers’ options for seeking improved living conditions. Limiting the movement of workers makes it tougher for them to refuse the bad deals bosses offer them, which in turn keeps weakens wages and working condition.

² This distinction between secured and unsecured members of the working class is drawn from the work of Antonio Negri and autonomist Marxism. The secured working class consists in part of unionized workers with benefits and securities such as unemployment insurance, cost of living allowances and pensions which may even extend beyond general rights of citizenship. The unsecured workers include temporary workers, homeless people and undocumented workers. (See Negri, 1989 and Hardt and Negri, 1984)

Of course socialists, anarchists and radical democrats have long maintained that people have the right to live, work and travel wherever they choose and to associate with whomever they choose. As internationalists, we actively oppose the national borders which serve to divide and segregate people. Governments have no right to determine community participation (citizenship) and anarchists view as legitimate any government claims to territorial sovereignty. It is important to remember that these views were once central parts of the international labor movement at the time of capitalist liberalism a century ago. It is time for labor to remember this vital part of its history.

CONCLUSION

Class war, as modern war is always spatial and territorial. Thus Canadian and US governments, under the cover provided by September 11th, are devising joint agreements around border controls and immigration criteria. There has even been chilling talk from some authorities about establishing a continental perimeter, a “Fortress North America.”

As many commentators have pointed out these practices are also about strengthening the government’s hand in fighting the globalization struggles at a time when many sensed it was beginning to lose its grip. This is one reason why legislation against activism has gone hand in hand with a clampdown on immigration, the global mobility of labor.

An enormous part of the work of spatializing class war has been carried out through policing and criminalization of various subject populations. This criminalization is more broadly deployed than is generally described. It also includes, fundamentally, the use of the repressive legal apparatus to keep possible forces of dissent from ever joining together in common cause: classic divide and conquer tactics. Whenever members of the working class are made to fear standing up against the bosses and the state, whether through threats of job loss, eviction or deportation this acts to quell possible rebellion.

When the legal state creates and perpetuates phony divisions between workers through immigration laws and the construction of “legals” and “illegals” we must recognize this as part of the spatialized class war. Likewise when these divisions are maintained through legal repression against poor people and homeless people. Any legal mechanism which impedes the recomposition of the working class as a stronger force or which helps a decomposition of the working class to the benefit of capital must be understood in this way.

Anti-capitalist organizations must take up the challenge of borders at local and global levels. OCAP deploys a variety of tactics to overcome the divide and conquer tactics which keep the opposition to capitalist control divided and weakened. Still, OCAP is an anti-poverty organization lacking the resources necessary to lead the fight. Organized labor must take up the challenge in a serious way, drawing on OCAP’s example but extending it radically. The old labor standard, “An Injury to One is an Injury to All” must be labor’s driving principle once more.

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