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Anarchist Workers on Tour

Looking Back on the 'Anarchy at Work' Speaking Tour

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2003

Retrieved on March 24, 2016 from web.archive.org
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#8, Fall/Winter 2003.

theanarchistlibrary.org

2003

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is at the point of production where everything starts in capitalist society, and hence where everything could stop...

Without a doubt, the 'Anarchy at Work' tour was a success for NEFAC and we hope it was just as beneficial for those who attended. From speaking in a union hall in Quebec City to meeting a former Love and Rage⁵ member and his unionist father and friends in Hamilton, to speaking in a packed café of beer and coffee drinking patrons in Montreal, to being witnesses to the wonderful organizing being done by the Ottawa IWW and ACCA⁶, to speaking in Kingston in mid-afternoon at the Sleepless Goat Café workers cooperative with its red and black flag out front, it's really the tour hosts that made anarchy work.

⁵ Love and Rage was a North American anarchist organization that existed from 1989–1998

⁶ Anti-Capitalist Community Action

betrayed its membership and eroded their faith in unionism, that base of workers is nonetheless still aware that a fight has to be fought against the boss class and that the union remains the best vehicle to fight it. But it is now more than ever essential to get the bureaucrats out of the driver's seat...

Young and Looking for a Union

In contrast to the older unionists in the audiences, there was also a good amount of young anarchists and anarchist sympathizers present. Most of them were what is called "precarious workers" in Canada, working in low-paid, part-time jobs with no security. Their workplaces are supermarkets, restaurants, large bookstores and chic cafés. In these workplaces there is a large amount of discontent but no palpable tradition of organizing. But this new generation of workers is looking to change that. They understand that their working standards are lower than that of their parents and that the way to get back to that position of (relative) power against the bosses is to organize and struggle collectively, be it with affiliation to a mainstream union, an alternative union (such as the IWW⁴) or simply with a non-affiliated workers association (such as the Bike Couriers Association of Montreal).

The anarchists of this new generation of workers know that unions must not only serve as a tool for gaining better working standards, but also as rallying points for the planning of the overthrow of capitalism and the building of a new (anarchist) world.

This move being made by younger anarchists getting involved in their workplaces is encouraging in NEFAC's perspective. Not only are they gaining a wider audience for their ideas than any protest movement can give them (even the large anti-globalization one), they are closer to actually challenging capitalism materially, as it

⁴ Industrial Workers of the World

In May 2003, NEFAC organized a speaking tour called 'Anarchy at Work' featuring members of our organization who have had diverse experiences in their workplaces and unions. The Canadian portion¹ of the tour made eight stops in ten days through Quebec and Ontario. In all, over 250 people attended the talks; they were young and old, workers (unionized and non-unionized alike), the unemployed, and students.

The 'Anarchy at Work' tour proved three things that we expected, or at least we hoped, were taking shape in the North American class politics. First, that anarchism, or rather the specific pro-organizational, class-struggle tendency within anarchism, is gaining ground within the various social movements of our class as a viable revolutionary alternative. Secondly, that older unionized workers amongst the rank and file feel betrayed by the union leadership, but haven't given up on the union itself and are looking for ways to organize independently, instead of abandoning labor activism as a whole. And thirdly, the arrival of a new generation of workers to mostly non-unionized workplaces that lack the working standards (pay, conditions) that their fathers and mothers knew before them, has provoked a small but feisty movement for unionization amongst younger workers.

Anarchism Becoming Relevant Again

Much energy and effort was put into the talks in order to dispel stereotypical assumptions about what anarchists are (be it the mad bomber or the primitivist living in a cave) which are broadly passed on in society, as we knew that many in our audiences may not be so familiar with what anarchism really is. Surprisingly, this wasn't as necessary as we thought.

¹ There are plans for a U.S. leg of the same tour sometime in the Fall or Winter of 2003. This article relates only to the Canadian portion of the tour.

Most people attending were aware of the constructive work of class struggle anarchists in the past years and laughed at references to the 19th century mad bombers and today's primitivists. When you think of it, this is not so far-fetched — be it through the anti-globalization movement, the movement for social housing in Canada (in which anarchists, amongst others, have played a key role in the past years, bringing in direct action tactics, mostly through squatting) and even through the labor movement in Ontario with

participation in rank and file “flying squads” and in Quebec with strike solidarity — anarchists have carved themselves out a niche in the social struggles of the working class, being active participants in the struggles while propagating the libertarian alternative of social revolution.

Obviously, many in attendance were anarchist sympathizers and others were politicized on the left, but it is a refreshing start for anarchism to become relevant again even though it doesn't yet have mass appeal amongst the working class.

Unionized and Ready to Fight

During the tour we met a fairly large number of older unionized workers, mostly from public sectors organized within CUPE² in Ontario. These workers were participants in the 1996 general strike and days of action against the Harris government, and were amongst the ranks of the flying squads who were seen everywhere in Ontario in those years, on pickets, in actions, and at large mobilizations. They also were part of the sector of the labor movement that strongly supported OCAP³, a radical anti-poverty group in Ontario. This support translated to a better bonding

² Canadian Union of Public Employees

³ Ontario Coalition Against Poverty

between community-based struggles and labor struggles. But most of this came to an abrupt end in the fall of 2001.

No, it wasn't September 11th that stopped them, but rather union leadership withdrawing their support for OCAP's economic shutdown campaign set for October 2001. Union leadership just couldn't accept actual economic disruption, like the planned shutdown of the commercial highways linking Windsor and Detroit, because in order to keep their six figure salaries they are inclined to want to maintain capitalist rule rather than challenge it. Simply if production plants stop running and the unionized membership stops paying it's dues, the bureaucrats will then have a tough time finding the money to pay themselves.

The flying squads still played an important role in the days of October 2001, but were strongly reprimanded for flying union colors and logos on their flags, as they weren't legitimate enough to use them, according to the union leadership. Following this was a move by the leadership to gain more control over the flying squads, going all the way to having paid officials participate in them even though they were meant to be autonomous bodies of the rank and file. Today, the autonomous flying squads are, sadly, almost dead.

Obviously, the workers we met in Ontario who lived and struggled through this feel betrayed by their union leadership, and rightly so. They are now looking for ways to keep the leadership out of the flying squads and out of what are supposed to be movements of the rank and file. A cross-union, base network of rank and file workers may be the way forward for them. This is one of the proposals that were on the table during the 'Anarchy at Work' tour, and more than 100 people signed up for it. Older unionists, having known a life of struggle against their bosses and against their union leadership, were particularly interested in this network which would serve as a means of communications between themselves and with the unorganized, but also as a web of solidarity able to bounce from one struggle to the next regardless of union affiliation. If mainstream labor union leadership has