

At War With Calendula

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A month ago a call came into the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) Hall in Portland. The front-end staff of a small, recently opened restaurant had struck the week before. The owner's immediate response was to fire all four of the strikers. Although this was the IWW's first contact with these workers, the union decided to support these workers in negotiating a settlement to the strike.

The negotiating committee of four workers and union representatives arrived at the restaurant at 9:15pm on a Sunday, approaching the owner on the sidewalk as he returned from taking an order on the patio. Catching his attention, they waited until he was through taking his order, and notified him that the IWW would now be representing the fired workers. When the union representatives requested a meeting be set up to discuss resolving the strike, the owner replied, "You are trespassing. If you don't leave my property right now, I'm calling the police." Although this response may seem typical, this was not your typical employer.

Revolutionary adventures in petit-bourgeois capitalism

For those who are not aware of him already, Craig Rosebraugh has made himself into a household name in the Pacific Northwest. About the same time the Portland Police department broke his arm during a rally to free political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal, Craig was the press spokesman for the Animal Liberation Front-Earth Liberation Front. For years, his house was regularly raided and openly surveilled by the FBI, and he was eventually subpoenaed, first to a federal grand jury in Portland, and later to testify before Congress, both times regarding 'ecoterrorism.' A number of local organizers, (including myself a member of the IWW assisting the striking restaurant workers) supported Craig, organizing a local support committee to combat the grand jury. Craig took a principled, political stand in the face of the attacks against him from the state, refusing to testify before the grand jury, and openly defending actions against property in front of Congress. Although always controversial both personally and politically, his principled stance won him the respect of many local revolutionaries, even if there were numerous disagreements with his understanding of revolutionary politics.

Most recently, Craig himself decided to launch a small capitalist venture to continue to fund his 'revolutionary' projects. His upscale vegan restaurant in SE Portland was billed as Portland's progressive eatery, with the menus and ads touting organic food, recycling, and well treated workers as the base of the business. The workers who appeared at the IWW Hall soon after the strike told another story, however. They had applied at Calendula excited at the idea of helping to promote healthy, vegan food. After working for eight months to build the business, they repeatedly found the promises made upon employment primarily health care and a respectful work environment—unfulfilled. After two rounds of wage cuts left them back at minimum wage, the workers decided to act. The striking workers made it clear that their primary issue was not wages, but the lack of respect for the workers within the restaurant.

Abigail, was one of the striking waitresses. She posted this to Portland's Indymedia site in response to attacks from the owner and by other Rosebraugh supporters, "There is no doubt that Craig worked hard, he did, however it often felt like he was working against our collective flow. His ego often blocked communication, when our lead server voiced our collective concerns he pronounced that if we were not happy then we should all leave, and she was sent home on one of our busiest nights. We had to cover for his egotistical decisions always. He made rash decisions

like laying off our awesome busser, while lowering our wages and changing the menu. So that we were working harder, with lower morale, with less wages. Instead of lowering prices and seeing results first.”

Jimmy Ray, another striker, responded to criticisms of the strikers on Indymedia in this way, “As an employee on strike from Calendula, I would first like to state that this entire debate is not about money. In Craig’s advertisement he rants on about the mad cash we were making at his floundering business. The issue at hand is not about Craig lowering our wages, but is about respect and a concerted desire to retain our dignity. Furthermore, the issue could have been quickly resolved had Craig agreed to listen to our grievances. Instead, he chose to treat us with disrespect, accusing us of trespassing and calling the police when we peacefully approached him to negotiate. In the long run, this has forced him to take out expensive full-page ads and hire high profile lawyers to speak on his behalf. Ironically enough, had Rosebraugh simply listened to us and responded tactfully and with respect, his money could have been saved. Additionally, after free meals and beverages were eliminated, the floor manager attempted to discuss the staff’s grievances with Rosebraugh, only to be sent home ‘for having a bad attitude’ on the night of our extremely busy grand re-opening party. That set precedence for the rest of us, and we became fearful of discussing our concerns with Rosebraugh. Indeed, when I did attempt to discuss my own issues with Craig (being passed up for a promotion which had been promised to me), he accused me of having a bad attitude and insisted that, unless it was ‘in my heart’ to work for him, we’d separate. If Rosebraugh believes these conditions constitute a “respectful work environment,” he has a very skewed definition of the term.”

Recognizing that Craig was a favorite target of the boss’ press, right-wing groupings, and the state itself, the IWW approached the strike at Craig’s restaurant carefully. The union decided to withhold publicizing the struggle, denying press interviews and attempting to persuade the owner to negotiate through contact with various members of the local left, rather than using the more common approaches of pickets, media, and bad publicity—thus avoiding giving right wing groups, the press, and the state more fodder against an individual who had taken brave stands against them.

Rosebraugh counterattacks

For three weeks, the union attempted to get Craig to negotiate. During this time, both the striking workers and the union denied the press interviews or information, not wanting to play into right wing blood lust for the former ALF/ELF spokesman on the other end of the dispute. Craig’s response was to hire a lawyer, and in conversations with community members attempting to mediate he declared he would “close the business before he would hire those workers back.” Finally, after three weeks of stonewalling from the owner, the workers went to the press. Three local papers covered the story, and Craig responded by spending almost \$3000 on a full-page ad in the two local weekly papers. His advertisement names the four workers and one IWW representative with full legal names, and accuses the IWW of trying to shut down Portland’s “Most Progressive Business.” In a string of lies, the ad accuses IWW representatives of bringing a mob to intimidate and harass Craig during his peak business hours.

The most visible gauge of the debate within the “activist community” in Portland revolved around the Portland Indymedia site. From accusations of the IWW being a part of a COINTEL-

PRO operation (carried as far as naming specific striking workers as cops) to condemnation of the IWW because it allows its members and organizers to eat meat, a rather entertaining discussion ensued.

ARISSA is an organization launched by Craig a few years back, ideologically driven by Craig's first book, "The Logic of Political Violence." Rosebraugh's supporters and members of ARISSA went on Indymedia to post numerous accusations of police infiltration and state collusion, specifically naming the IWW and striking workers as provocateurs and agents. The posting of unfounded and unverifiable accusations in a public forum goes beyond the obvious attempts at displacing responsibility for the strike on Craig's behalf. It enters the dangerous, irresponsible realm of snitch-jacketing: opening those truly struggling for a better world to manipulations by the state. Following the thread of debate on Indymedia, the accusations quickly became picked up and repeated as fact, although no individual or organization had produced a shred of evidence to verify them.

Where does the activist 'left' stand on class?

Craig himself has been a very visible and vocal name within Portland's activist community. Because of this, the Indymedia debate was largely split along two lines. In the minority of those posting, there were those who recognized that workers' struggles against boss-imposed direction and discipline against the alienation that capitalist work relationships foster, regardless of good intentions, is at the base of the struggle for the new society. These folks supported the IWW and the strike. On the other, there were those who argued that for a broad range of reasons—Craig's past work, the media's blood lust for him, the fact that the restaurant was all organic and vegan and locally owned, or that Craig's intention with the restaurant was to, "fund social change ventures"—that the union should not have involved itself in the strike. To those on Craig's side of the fence, the IWW was guilty of undermining the community, the struggle, and the revolution itself by supporting these workers. A number of people, Craig included, even argued that the workers had no right to protest because with tips they were making a better wage than other workers in the area.

These responses from Rosebraugh, ARISSA, and the Portland activist community provide an excellent demonstration of a number of limitations of a class-less "progressive" politics. Even when playing lip service to worker's struggles, to liberation, and to revolution itself, the "activist" left is dominated by petit bourgeois voices. This is not meant as a simplistic assessment of individuals based on class background. What this actually reflects is how the activist left, which has often the people who have the most access to resources. Because class and class interests have not been at the fore of the "new anti-globalization" activist movement, it has not been capable of developing a politic capable of assuring that leadership and voice will be given to social groupings currently disenfranchised within this system. In missing this critical understanding—an assessment of which class and which portions of that class are most likely to push struggles into revolutionary directions—this movement has missed the target entirely. The voices currently dominating the discussion have class interests incapable of bringing a meaningful criticism of capital and the social relationships that result from capitalism.

This is a significant reason why this "new activist left" does not have a mass base or appeal within the working class. Due to its lack of class position, it is those who have access to resources

that get to define the politics of this movement. When those resources and the privilege that come with them come are questioned in struggle (no matter how small), real principles go out the window. It's fine to talk about saving forests, monkeys, and fighting imperialism outside of the Empire itself. It is also tactical to host, "Ending white supremacy" trainings and sessions deconstructing privilege. But when real struggle comes to these leaders' own backyards and they find themselves in a position where their own relationships to capitalism are seriously questioned, class interests themselves speak louder than revolutionary sloganeering.

This small strike brings to the fore why the "activist left" has little interest to that broad, stratified and diverse mass we call the working class. In challenging the alienation that is a necessary by-product of work under capitalism, the struggle against that alienation is the actual basis of struggle for a new world. The voices leading the "activist left" are incapable of allowing a criticism that answers to the daily struggles of workers and to their alienation. This is in part because they cannot grasp the real meaning of these struggles but even more, they can't grasp the actual experience of that alienation. Their class positions guide their actions, regardless of their theoretical understanding (or misunderstanding) of the struggle we face.

Particularly telling are some of Craig's arguments in his paid advertisement: that the workers were well paid (a debatable assertion), or that his actions in the restaurant were justified because the restaurant was going to fund his "social change ventures." The statements made on Indymedia by the workers themselves are arguments that a meaningful revolutionary politic must be based on the rejection of capitalist work models themselves. This politics is a yearning for worker control and not simply a struggle for wages. It's a struggle to reclaim that large portion of their lives working for someone else and to reorganize it in a manner that suits their own inclinations, regardless of the "revolutionarily consciousness" of their boss.

Workers' struggles are struggles against work

It is the struggle and rejection of work itself, and the alienation that is inherent in wage labor, in which the seeds of the new world lie. Any "revolutionary" movement incapable of seeing the rejection of work itself as the basis for struggle will find itself unable to relate to the daily struggles of the only class of people who are capable of bringing this decrepit system to its knees, regardless of whether the facet of struggle is against police brutality, environmental devastation, prisons, poverty, or any of the other potentially explosive contradictions that our society confronts. It is within the struggles workers are constantly waging to reclaim control of the workplace itself that revolutionaries must learn to recognize the potential revolutionary force in those portions of the population so often dismissed by activists as "backwards" and inept.

Lessons in intersections

The situation with Craig Rosebraugh and his little adventure in petit bourgeois capitalism have only brought a suppressed contradiction within this new activist left to the fore. The activist community is comfortable fighting for rights for animals, for an end to clear cutting, for more bikes, and even sometimes advocating armed struggle as an avenue for social change. As a white-led and largely privileged strata, there is a massive disconnect between reading Ward Churchill and writing your thesis on armed struggle and actually being a part of organizing a movement

capable of asserting its own power and defending itself. Craig's inability to recognize how truly relinquishing power and privilege are necessary in creating the space for revolutionary leadership is an excellent example of this stumbling block. This same political trend is good at holding trainings and workshops on deconstructing privilege and speaking the language of "communities of color" and "revolutionary feminism," but as a movement it is incapable of opening spaces where these communities and perspectives can actually lead a movement. It will continue to be incapable until it not only speaks of, but puts into play a recognition of class, and how it interacts with racism, sexism, and all of the other destruction reaped upon our planet and our lives. This is not an argument that the long sought after unity of the working class across racial, sexual, and other boundaries will simplistically come about as a result of workplace struggles. It is simply an acknowledgement that to even begin to confront the central questions of race, class, and gender in building a revolutionary movement, a recognition of the limitations and misleading nature of the activist left's politics must be given.

What happens when the interests of those truly disenfranchised (and the only class capable of making the revolutionary change we envision) come into conflict with a fearless leader who is using a capitalist enterprise to further his revolutionary projects? There is no longer a fence for "anti-capitalists, anarchists, radicals, or progressives" to sit on when it comes to class.

The activist left's defense of Rosebraugh's actions against wildcat activity by workers within his restaurant provides a long-needed clarification of the position of a number of organizations and individuals within this milieu. Craig's thousands of dollars of advertising are a great opportunity for the IWW to define itself as clearly committed to a revolutionary model that is led by workers themselves. In doing so, it has placed the IWW in a position of alienation from portions of the activist left but opened itself to an explicit commitment to supporting workers in their struggle to regain control of their workplaces and their lives. (Four new workers called to join the union in the two days after Rosebraugh's ad was published.) Not only is this clarification useful, it is necessary if we are to build a mass movement with class and race at the fore. What this small struggle has done is force the activist left to declare its alliances—on one side the workers, and on the other, an opportunist, underdeveloped politic. This opportunistic side of the left's own class interests leave it unable to see how the struggle of workers against not only poverty but for control of the production process itself is the only basis on which we can begin to build a new society.

For those not in the IWW, or not engaged in organizing around workplace struggles, this is an opportunity to reflect on how we must break with this class-less left if we are to develop organizations capable of interacting with the real struggles of oppressed and potentially revolutionary strata within the United States itself. There is a massive segment of the population forced to struggle daily against numerous contradictions, which threaten to open this state to a real revolutionary upsurge. A movement led by petit bourgeois class interests will at best co-opt these upsurges, and at worst be entirely incapable of engaging them. If we plan to be a part of those struggles, to engage with them, or to work alongside them, we must drop the baggage of the existing left, and forge a new movement with an explicit commitment to developing leadership and analysis outside of that milieu.

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