FULL MARKS FOR PARTICIPATION? DEMOCRATIC ORGANIZATION AND THE CUPE 3903 STRIKE AT YORK

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Introduction

From October 26th, 2000 to January 11, 2001, the attention of Ontario's university educators, administrators, and a good deal of its graduate and undergraduate students was focused on York University.[1] Following an unsuccessful eight-week York faculty strike in 1997, a defeated four-week strike of teaching assistants at University of Toronto in January 2000, and an ambiguous end to a month-long strike at McMaster, roughly 2100 York University teaching assistants, part-time contract faculty, and graduate and research assistants in Canadian Union of Public Employees Local 3903 scored a badly-needed victory against an employer determined to wring concessions from the union.[2] The 78-day struggle enters the record as the longest university strike in English Canadian history, and is expected to prove "a watershed event" in the history of York University if not the post-secondary sector beyond.[3]

The CUPE 3903 strike witnessed a remarkable outpouring of creativity, determination, and enthusiasm from its striking members. Their militancy and élan earned the solidarity of other unions, the grudging respect of opponents, and the support of many more situated well beyond the university community. The larger issues raised concerning tuition, student debt loads, and the work and employment conditions of teaching assistants and contract faculty meant the strike quickly became a political touchstone, coming amidst another wave of attacks on public services and workers' rights, including passage of Bill 132 allowing for private universities in Ontario, and Bill 147 weakening provincial employment standards legislation.[4]

The resilience of the union was a particular source of interest, since the outcome of the strike appeared to be a foregone conclusion. On the employer side, the administration was determined to position itself in the new era of international competition and private universities, unburdening the university of encumbrances and 'rigidities' such as the tuition indexation it had conceded to teaching assistants in 1998. As for the union, the strike brought dozens of freshly-enrolled MA and PhD students onto the

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[1] Many thanks to Marsha Niemeijer for comments on an earlier draft; any shortcomings are the fault of the author alone.

[2] CUPE 3903 combines 2 older bargaining units comprising teaching assistants (unit 1) and contract and part-time faculty (unit 2), and a new unit of graduate and research assistants (unit 3) that struck for a first contract. At the time of the strike, the scope of unit 3 was still in dispute.

[3] Press Release, "Senate Resolution to Establish a Special Sub-Committee of Senate Executive Approved by the Senate of York University," March 22, 2001.

[4] As Richard Wellen correctly pointed out, the gains won in the strike pale beside the issues raised; G. Bouchard, "Sessional Instructors Unite," *University of Alberta Folio*, January 26, 2001.

picket lines.[5] For many members, the walkout was not only the first experience of being at the centre of a labour dispute, but a sudden introduction to the language, structure, and culture of trade unions themselves.

In assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the strike, the sheer feat of winning—a precious victory among all-too-many defeats—looms large. It is tempting to argue that the proof of the pudding lies in the eating: that the scale of the achievement confirms the soundness of the strike in essential respect. Equally, the magnitude of the accomplishment could invite the feeling that the union 'got lucky' (e.g., the provincial legislature happened to be in recess, and back-to-work legislation was not readily available to the government), or that the determinants of the strike's success lie largely beyond the power of the union to influence.

The assessment offered here contains a number of premises. It starts with the recognition that the fate of the strike was shaped in significant ways by larger financial and institutional determinants, over which the union had limited control (including the strong financial support from CUPE, the support from faculty in University Senate, the comparatively favourable geography of York University, and the unwillingness of the Administration to go to the lengths necessary to break our union). The assumption, however, is that the successful outcome of the strike stemmed to a significant degree from our own organization and action, and was not simply determined by exogenous factors we could indirectly influence but not control. It follows that whatever weaknesses existed remain within our power to address, and

[5] The union drive to organize research and graduate assistants was in its early stages when the strike broke out.

are not fixed by our status as intellect workers, occupation as researchers and teachers, turnover as a student body, or class position. The belief that what we did mattered is a final premise for the conviction that self-criticism is key to identifying weaknesses, building on strengths, and arriving at recommendations to do better the next time.

This paper argues that while the strike succeeded precisely because of the sympathy and active support of members, limits on the greater mobilization and participation of the wider membership ultimately restricted support, contributing to tensions between members and leadership that periodically arose, and testing the limits of solidarity. The democratic nature of the union and the strike was most apparent in the involvement of already-mobilized members and an openness to activists seeking to participate, but was most limited in developing the organizational forms capable of fostering the deeper involvement of all members. With a high degree of effectiveness, the strike combined the *uneven* participation of an overloaded, relatively broad layer of activists, with the underutilization of many sympathetic, solidaristic, and often enthusiastic, if typically reticent members. Union decision-making structures were open to the membership, and appeals were made to members to become involved as individuals and activists. Yet as open and permeable as the structures were, that there was limited involvement of many suggests not only untapped potential, but points to contributing organizational factors in the tensions between members, and between membership and leadership, that arose periodically during the strike.

By effectively fusing powerful (if spontaneous and short-lived) *organic* ties of commitment where *institutionalized* solidarities were more thinly developed, the success of the

strike has actually masked enduring organizational weaknesses in the union. Though critical in sustaining members through the long strike, the ties of solidarity, fraternity, and loyalty that many members felt for militants comprising the elected and unelected leadership could and did weaken at difficult moments. When they did, the structures needed to restore and strengthen ties to informal and formal leaders were lacking. Two related weaknesses in particular were evident during the strike: insufficient member education, and organizational gaps in the mobilization of members and the conduct of the strike. These factors emerged as a greatest liability in late November, but were never determinant in the outcome of the strike, in significant part because of the resilience of informal and practical ties of solidarity and trust already established among the membership.

In exploring this argument, the account steers away from furnishing a comprehensive record of the strike, and says little about the issues in collective bargaining, focusing instead on the strike's organizational dimensions from the vantage of the membership.[6] The paper also spends little time on the frequently intense conflicts within and between the executive and bargaining team, struggles that were undoubtedly significant in determining the direction of union policy and negotiating strategy. Many of these conflicts, especially those early in the strike, occurred over questions of transparency and leadership accountability to members. Yet while struggles went on in the leadership over how best

[6] This account relies on meeting minutes, notes, discussions with participants, and personal experience coloured by the Sentinel picket-line in particular.

to ensure participatory democracy and membership control, particularly over which bodies should hold decision-making power, they often turned on arguments concerning the relative influence that those already mobilized and active in the strike would exert over decision-making. In other words, the structural weaknesses in the organization and mobilization of the wider membership itself—which this paper argues were especially important —is overlooked in an account that focuses purely on the struggles at the top.

The first section of the paper situates the growing attention given to organizational questions of democratic participation in the context of the shifting fortunes of the strike. The second section addresses some of the consequences of organizational weaknesses, locating their source in union practices prior to the strike. The conclusion draws lessons, and briefly raises some proposals for addressing weaknesses revealed during the strike.

CUPE 3903 and the Strike

As might be expected in any complex, democratic organization engaged in struggle, tension between member control and leadership flexibility existed throughout the strike, shifting from conflicts over picket-line tactics to bargaining strategy. The trajectory of the strike—from the initial lift when pickets resisted their removal from campus, to creeping defensiveness as the university broke off talks in late November, and renewed determination around the January forced vote—produced shifting and often contradictory demands for greater membership say and more leadership initiative, more control over the bargaining team and greater flexibility for committee members to strike a

deal. The changing mood of the strike, from initial confidence to momentary defensiveness, meant that weak spots in strike organization came to light at points rather than continuously through the dispute. It was at the low point, the roughly two weeks of employer stonewalling, harassment, and finally breakdown of bargaining (coinciding with Senate restructuring) between November 20th and the return to bargaining sanctioned by the membership December 7th, that the weaknesses became most apparent, and showed the greatest potential to become a liability. It was at this moment that the limits of unstructured ties of fraternity and solidarity linking underutilized members and overstretched activists were tested. Existing structures were blunt instruments for cementing these ties under pressure. Organizationally, the decision-making bodies of membership involvement tended to be union-wide (strike committee, general membership meetings) without links to any permanent decentralized structures organizing and educating people on a daily basis.

The need for venues to discuss strike issues was already apparent as the first confusion surfaced around the decision to drop the picket lines for student convocation on Friday November 3rd. This dispute reflected an uncertainty over the *strategic role* of the picket lines that escaped collective debate and clarification through the strike: what was the relation between picket-line obstruction as part of the withdrawal of our labour and the denial of services, and the strategic deployment of picket-lines to influence opinion and win allies among the undergraduate and university community in order to exert political pressure on the administration? Although the answer arrived, willy-nilly, late in the strike when the ability to deny labour services into

January and thereby jeopardize the summer 2001 term decided the issue, the lack of formal channels in which all pickets could systematically think through and discuss strategy meant informal discussions over tactics, from convocation to shift schedules to consolidation of the lines over the December break, went on against a backdrop of recurring uncertainty over the strategic role of the picket lines.[7]

Despite the good faith shown during convocation the previous Friday, the union received an ultimatum Monday morning from the administration on protocol, demanding blocks of 15 cars every 5 minutes. Strike committee that evening agreed to blocks of 4 and 8 (lines had been running single cars), but received an order Tuesday morning to vacate university property by 1pm. At a very full emergency general membership meeting, hastily called for later that morning, people pushed to return to the picket lines, and at well-attended strike committee that evening and in subsequent evenings, discussion centred around possible responses from the police and the union.

The crisis provoked by the eviction threat accomplished a number of things. First, when the university climbed down from the impending confrontation, members' confidence was strengthened significantly, sustaining them for days and weeks afterwards through little progress at the bargaining

[7] This uncertainty likely explains pickets' own shifting conceptions of the lines, from instruments of maximum disruption, to opportunities to win the sympathy of potential allies by minimizing the irritation of crossing the picket lines. More broadly, as we suggest below, the affinity for militant action along the lines of industrial unionism eclipsed a strategy of deepening the union's capacity to mobilize and equip its members for a political and ideological war of position'.

table. Creative energies were unleashed, and picket lines more than ever became the focus of ingenuity. Cookouts, teach-ins, and the construction of sheds on the line, as well as other actions followed.

More immediately, the uncertainty faced during the crisis, and the difficulty in reaching consensus, fed a demand for greater direction from the leadership. The intensity of the discussions planning the course of action solely over the 8 hours to follow seemed to highlight the fact that the union was in perpetual crisis-management mode, while its longer-term strategy appeared vague and ambiguous to members. This produced a call for leadership to demonstrate the direction and strategic plan of the strike, permitting the executive to develop some distance from immediate picket-line concerns. While this led to the leadership bringing tactical proposals around demonstrations and off-campus actions to GMM, which members could criticize and debate, it never led to forums in which average members themselves could learn about, debate, and decide strategy. This instead was relegated to informal and impromptu venues such as picket-line discussions.

Finally, it led to the restructuring of strike committee on November 8th, part of the bid to alleviate the pressure of day-to-day strike management on the executive. With the crisis consuming individual energies having passed, this also led to a shift in emphasis towards organizing demonstrations in support of the strike, and a predictably reduced level of participation from the membership in strike committee as immediate threats subsided, raising the question of the body's relationship to the picket lines.

Withstanding the university's intimidation tactics boosted confidence and sustained spirits for the following week,

despite the employer stonewalling at the bargaining table. At a poorly-attended Saturday November 11th GMM on the campus of University of Toronto, members seemed in good spirits, despite the fact the weather had begun to sour. A week later, at a GMM on Friday November 17th, a YUFA faculty representative expressed admiration for the ingenuity of the strike, and stressed the need to continue to build the feeling among members that the union and the strike belonged to them. CUPE Ontario President Sid Ryan expressed the need to look beyond the picket lines and intensify political pressure in support of the strike, and at this same GMM, the executive presented its first set of proposals for actions beyond the picket line, setting up a relationship in which the leadership established direction, and a militant membership criticized and proposed counter-initiatives. GMMs featured militant resolutions, and the sense of strength kept speculation about how far the membership was willing to compromise on the bargaining issues—which would require knowing much more about these issues—from arising.

It was only at the end of November that confidence began to slip, as the employer failed to respond as hoped to the solidity of the strike. Bargaining continued to drag on, with little movement from the employer, and tensions between members and leaders rose to the surface. After a rally on Friday November 17th, a hastily-arranged march to the administrative offices on the 9th floor of Ross Building left many feeling insufficiently informed and prepared for what had happened. The following Monday, the union's bargaining committee presented a without-prejudice proposal on tuition indexation, under which tuition would be incorporated into the total compensation package to CUPE

members and then indexed to any increases. While promising tax benefits for members and premium-reductions for the employer, the proposal was flawed (not least for international students and people with tuition covered from other sources), and by Wednesday, the offer was removed from the table. However, a hail of criticism ensued, heightening the question of holding the bargaining team to original objectives versus granting them the flexibility to get a deal, and placing efforts to ensure consultation on bargaining proposals on the union's agenda. Informal leaders moved resolutions at GMM restricting the bargaining team from making concessions at the table, resolutions supported and passed by the membership. Simultaneously, serious division surfaced at the November 25th GMM between unit 2 and the other units.

The gloom continued to gather. With bargaining at an impasse and the union trying to generate movement on the other side of the table, university harassment of pickets was stepped up, with the employer stealing union safety equipment on Monday November 20th. The provocation continued when on Wednesday the union received a police ultimatum to remove the blue traffic gates by 7am Thursday, amidst allegations of criminal activity which were later spread in the media. The union responded with a rally and 40-50 union members and supporters occupying Liberal Party headquarters Thursday morning.

At this point in the strike, earlier tensions over leadership were now plain, and the November 25th GMM saw sharp criticism of the executive over the failure to provide direction on the blue safety gates. Perhaps anticipating the reaction from the picket lines, the executive decided to avoid proposing that the lines relinquish their gates, relaying

instead the police's expectations, but issuing no instructions as to the fate of the safety gates. The feeling ensued that members were being sent out into a difficult situation to fend for themselves, with little guidance from the executive. Strike committee offered little recourse, having by this time lost its earlier organic connection with the lines, and was circumvented during this second crisis. Where exercises in picket-line debate and decision-making were hastily improvised, such as on Sentinel, discussion became interminable and the resulting paralysis disgusted many, re-sparking the demand for greater direction from the leadership, and less reliance on initiative from the lines.

The low-point of the strike, and the biggest blow to confidence, followed Monday November 27th, when the administration broke off bargaining, insisting the union show further movement before permitting talks to continue. A few hours later, University Senate executive restructured the term, relieving pressure on the administration until January. Amidst the ensuing recrimination, and as it appeared confidence might be shaken, the first sense emerged among members that they needed to know a great deal more about the issues and become directly involved in all aspects of the strike. From November 27th to December 7th, a darker mood set in due to the lack of bargaining, and the solidaristic ties to informal leaders and militants predictably weakened. A divisive GMM followed December 1st, featuring strong criticism from individuals, and break-out groups channeling the expression of fears and anxieties of many members.

Organizational problems also began to receive more attention. At this time, Sentinel members began to discuss planned self-organization, as a means of addressing the

perceived gap opening up between the leadership and members. Meetings were held on November 29th and December 2nd, with two objectives: to organize bargaining information sessions to answer rudimentary questions about the issues at stake, and the administration and union's strategies; and to discuss membership initiatives around internal organizing. In regard to the latter initiative, off-line activities would be identified and organized at the picket-line level to supplement the work of union-wide bodies, coordinated by strike committee and supported with strike benefits.

Half-formed as these proposals were, skepticism and doubt spread even to those in support of the initiative. Why not participate in strike committee if you want to be more involved? Why create additional structures that risk sectionalism and even greater levels of attachment and identification with individual picket-lines instead of the strike effort as a whole? The proposal moreover threatened to detract from the important activist work undertaken in strike committee—with limited time, energy, and resources to take on additional efforts involving the restructuring of the union and the strike. Ironically (and indicative of the organizational vacuum existing beyond the strike committee), although the proposed structures were designed to supplement but exist independently of strike committee, members turned precisely there for support.

Plans for rank-and-file organization eventually went nowhere. While the informal gathering planning the initiative threatened to degenerate into a talking shop, individual activists went ahead and accomplished tasks instead of agonizing over the appropriate structures. By December 7th, talks were scheduled to resume, and the

motion to sanction bargaining under a two-day media blackout (Monday the 10th and Tuesday the 11th) reflected the shifting mood. Although a majority on executive fought the proposal, rejecting it twice, the membership at GMM passed it handily, even though it was understood to represent, even if only symbolically, a means to isolate the bargaining team from the membership.

On December 14th, a GMM was convened to report significant movement, and shortly afterward, a forced ratification vote was called. Once again, the employer's precipitate actions galvanized the members, strengthened their determination, and united them behind the leadership. From this point, confidence built once more, through demonstrations up to Christmas, a NO vote campaign, and increasingly persuasive arguments against ratification as the January deadline for saving the summer 2001 term drew near.

Strike Organization: Activists Without Structures?

Early in the strike, the leadership was divided and least prepared to direct the membership, and discipline among members was inchoate at best. Members' initial experience with participation in the strike, and in many cases their introduction to the union itself, came through picketing. However, the organizational forms to hold and productively channel initial tensions between leadership and members were frequently stretched.

As critical as they were, even weekly GMMs could not substitute for permanent local organization. To be sure, the relative ignorance and uncertainty over bargaining issues turned GMMs into crucial sources of information for many,

and primarily so, given the unfamiliar rules of order (and the facility with these rules demonstrated by influential opinion-shapers). Forming individual opinions by listening to arguments from elected and informal leaders on either side of the issues was critically important as an educative and deliberative exercise, even though it was unable to widen its *participative* component to fully include the membership in democratic discussion. A familiar problem was the elite lexicon of procedural rules of order, a problem common to even the most democratic unions, restricting member input yet indispensable to effective union-wide meetings of the general membership. The occasional procedural tangle aside, however, the constraining rules structure only added to whatever uncertainty might have been felt by newer members needing to ask simple questions and requiring basic explanations and clarifications. Informal bodies at a picket-line or departmental level might have been ideally suited to this preliminary work, acting as sounding boards to draw out uncertainties and misunderstandings, stimulate discussion of strategic direction, and shore up confidence through information-sharing and collective analysis.

In an attempt to remove organizational obstacles, circumvent informal leaders, and directly canvass more reticent members, the executive improvised alternatives. Starting at the December 1st GMM, the assembled membership was asked to break into small groups to discuss and report back to the meeting their interests and concerns around bargaining. Immediately apparent was the readiness with which junior members (often unit 3), women, and members with first languages other than English participated in the small group discussions, despite hesitations to wade into the sometimes arena-like fray of meeting-wide debate.

Yet although beginning to initiate discussion, as well as revealing important weaknesses in the membership requiring redoubled education and confidence-building, the ad hoc and ersatz nature of the break-out groups exercise alienated some, including those who had called for such feedback. While addressing a real need, and characteristic of the democratic inclinations of many executive members, the limitations of these improvised exercises illustrated more fundamental organizational gaps, if only because they ventilated simmering anxieties without any means of systematically containing, addressing, and assuaging such fears.

Unit caucuses as educative and mobilization groups became better organized in response to bargaining developments and emerging divisions, and were increasingly effective as the strike progressed. But these were uneven (unit 1 lacked a functioning caucus) and under-representative, reflecting their limitations as mobilizing vehicles for pickets and striking members inhabiting specific departments and picket-line communities. The stewards council, which might have formed the nucleus of a network of permanent local structures, vanished with the start of the strike.[8] When the lines went up, stewards, often departmental activists in their previous incarnation, threw themselves into much-needed tasks in their roles as strike-coordinators, picket-coordinators and picket-captains, leaving the existing front-line representative layer of the union defunct.

[8] Strike policy provides that a bargaining mobilization committee, followed by strike committee, replace the stewards council as the union swings into strike mode; a review of strike policy might profitably address the reasons for jettisoning the stewards network in the transition.

Although the intention was to expand the narrow membership and focus of the steward's council into an open and inclusive strike mobilization committee, the fact that the specific structure of the stewards council could be so easily jettisoned perhaps speaks to its prior limitations as a mobilizational instrument. The steward council fulfills the indispensable role of relaying the administrative details of labour-management discussions to departmental stewards, equipping them to respond to the concerns and questions of members. It also provides a forum for chief stewards to learn what's happening 'on the ground' with regards to conflicts and confusions over the contract, as well as allowing for some degree of information-sharing between stewards as well. However, the steward system is uneven across departments, and in even the most politicized departments, stewards direct their energies (over and above community activist work) primarily towards grievance handling and conveying union literature and communiqués to the membership. Beyond making literature available, its role in internal organizing, ensuring the assimilation of the union message, and mobilizing the membership within departments is less developed. It stands to reason the steward system was never called upon as an obvious and valuable structure indispensable to conducting the strike.

Strike administration and tactics were therefore conceived, agreed upon, and directed—democratically and in open fashion, to be sure—on a union-wide level, commonly in strike committee, before being disseminated to the lines (typically through email). Yet strike committee was suspended in mid-air—no coordinating organizational forms existed below it to ensure picket lines contributed to union-wide strike strategy, or that union-wide decisions

synchronizing line activity were properly disseminated and executed locally. Leaving aside whether membership in a restructured strike committee would be open to members generally or restricted to line representatives, raising the possibility of line delegates only posed the question, 'delegates from what?' The absence of inter-departmental picket-line level organization itself restricted participation in strike committee, if only because shifts understandably could not be relied upon to send representatives on an ad hoc basis. Beyond the relation to strike committee, however, internal organizing work, such as identifying gaps and weaknesses in the rank and file and relaying them to the leadership, shoring up solidarity among members through member-to-member education work, identifying and approaching departmental colleagues absent from the lines, arriving at permanent solutions to weak picket lines, rectifying imbalances between shifts, and the like could have been undertaken systematically by members self-organized by department or picket line. Assisting in communications work, between the lines and between members and union-wide committees, was a further task that would have benefited from more grassroots involvement. Members could have received strike benefits as an incentive to participate in these activities, on a rotating basis, rather than being paid solely to walk the picket lines, and later, to attend demonstrations and GMMs.

Arguably, the lack of permanent decentralized structures of participation and involvement aggravated tensions between members and leaders in two ways. First, weaknesses in the communication structure—top-down and only minimal across picket-lines—were visible to members and criticized from an early stage. Part of this stemmed from the overloaded responsibilities of activists in the role of

communications and media officers. Communication was organized from the top by designated individuals, supplemented by individual activists stepping forward in response to appeals for help or identifying and responding to what they perceived as untended tasks. But the role and significance of these individuals' often super-human efforts also highlighted the absence of decentralized, participatory forms that might have included the expansion and intensification of communications work as part of their designated tasks. In the initial stages of the strike, the full extent of this liability was not apparent. Left to adjust to the new routine of the picket line, while facing the crisis of employers' threats and harassment, members were sufficiently overwhelming that for the first 3 weeks of the strike, there was little attention paid to bargaining issues or strike strategy by many members. Yet this contributed later to a sense of anxiety when members scrambled to get up to speed on bargaining issues and the formulation of strategy, leading to, among other things, increasing impatience with communications.

When the University's December 14th offer was first discussed at GMM, and again following the announcement of a forced ratification vote, activists proposing a 'NO' vote campaign turned their attention to organizing a call-around. Although it was agreed that the most effective and persuasive means would be to organize on the basis of departments, lines or even units, the structures to carry this out for the most part didn't exist. Activists once more stepped forward without structures. What appeared at first glance to be a limitation intrinsic to email communication revealed an organizational weakness—the more personal and effective telephone communication couldn't replace the more awkward medium of email because the organizational basis for an encompassing phone fan-out didn't exist. For communications throughout the strike, email was thus a logical, if frustratingly limited, instrument for overloaded individuals necessarily trying to reach as many people as possible in a short span of time, with little assistance.

Secondly, although decentralized self-organization raised the risk of sectionalism, the lack of mediating structures between coordinated but informally organized picket-line activity and the union-wide bodies of activism may ironically have reinforced the feeling of routinization and fealty to individual picket lines that congealed as the strike went on. Ironically, at the same time that ingenuity and inventiveness on the line increased and ties of solidarity among pickets deepened, the routinization of picketing and preoccupation with the picket lines became more apparent, part of the catalyst for Sentinel gate beginning to focus on problems of organization towards the fourth week in November. This 'reification'[9] was particularly evident as picket lines were consolidated over the December break, forcing people out of old routines and consequently resisted despite being necessary for the strike as a whole. If activists, engaged in union-wide bodies, could best see the strike as an integral whole, the energies of members focused intently on the quiet struggle to sustain strong picket lines became increasingly tied up in that effort.[10] When members did leave

[9] Although this characterization of the picket lines follows that of an executive member at the November 7th emergency GMM, it is not meant in the least to diminish the strength, importance and ingenuity of the picket lines.

[10] Approximately 1000 members received strike benefits at least once, typically performing some picket duty or related strike activity in

the picket lines and engage in off-campus and union-wide actions, they were understandably chary about the nature of the actions they were getting involved in—despite undeniably powerful ties of trust and commitment to the activists leading the way.

While the strength of the activists in the strike commonly meant highly competent people had responsibility for important tasks, resources were also necessarily stretched as tasks were not distributed among a sufficiently large number of people. The desire to see the most capable and experienced perform the duties that matter the most was natural, especially in a strike. However, alongside the benefits came the costs of not widening capacities and responsibilities by ensuring people are brought in, even where this involves trusting people to make their own mistakes and learn by them. A strike may be the best rather than the worst time to build trust in members in this regard, precisely because the stakes are high.

In addition to organizational gaps, the experience of the first 3 to 4 weeks of the strike revealed the need for greater education. Despite picket training as part of the mobilization involved in the lead-up to the strike, member education was a secondary priority in the strike and knowledge of the contract and bargaining issues was limited until relatively late in the game. Individual picket lines organized exciting and creative departmental teach-ins—'history on the line', 'education on the line', even 'labour law on the line'—while education rallies in Vari Hall brought undergraduates, instructors and graduate students together to draw the links

exchange, while 400-500 members attended GMMs and customarily 10-20 attended daily strike committee meetings.

between the strike and the political and economic context of the assault on post-secondary education. Union-wide education of members about bargaining issues during the strike was less developed, a frustrating development given the extensive energies devoted to contract awareness prior to the strike (when members were less likely to show interest). The lack of emphasis on member education—compared for instance to emphasis that came to be placed on undergraduate outreach on the issues—may have stemmed in part from striking members ('intellectuals', after all) being unwilling to admit ignorance of the issues, and those familiar with the issues unwilling to probe the ignorance of others, leaving individuals (self-directed in their role as academics in normal times, and perhaps jealous of their autonomy) to the task of educating themselves. It may also have been that the remarkable trust and solidarity with the leadership permitted many members to avoid learning the issues until compelled to do so amidst the uncertainty setting in at the end of November. At this point, the role of the informal leadership in educating and shaping opinion was crucial and often effective, but also with the consequence that GMMs became useful to members in the first instance as information sessions rather than windows of member initiative. Leaflets and educational material were distributed to the lines to go out to cars, but education of members was not identified as itself a major objective (partly because officers were so strapped with fulfilling other tasks), and no organizational basis existed to systematically address members' lack of confidence and uncertainty about basic issues.

To be sure, the strike itself was an instructive experience, giving many their first lesson about the power of solidarity

and collective action, the undemocratic nature of university governance, and the harsh reality of restructuring in post-secondary education. But while learning through experience with collective action on the picket line, it was wishful thinking to believe members would quickly find the issues in bargaining—or even learn about the structure of the union—on their own. It couldn't be expected that university education workers were particularly well-informed about their contract, the issues, or even the language of unionism and procedural rules of order. Rudimentary questions needed to be elicited, and basic information imparted.

The lack of education seemed also to be an indication of the limited importance placed on building the union through the strike. Remarkably, members missed the opportunity to learn about the historical continuity of the present strike with past struggles, either strikes at other Ontario and Canadian universities, or even the past history of the struggles waged by CUPE 3903 and CUEW at York before it. The attachment members felt during the strike to CUPE itself was limited, although feeling for the local union and its leading members was strong. Education about the strike, and its place in the history of struggles of the local and the union, as an opportunity for building the union itself was passed up.

To date, the union has struggled to overcome uneven and limited membership involvement in the union. During bargaining, and especially around strike votes and ratification, the union has witnessed increased levels of membership awareness and involvement, but which tends to evaporate once contracts are renewed. The pattern has therefore been one of strong and continuous involvement by a sizable core of activists, largely from social science and humanities departments and unit 1, with a strong command

of union procedure and extensive knowledge of university governance and the workings of the university community. Executive and bargaining team members circulating through roles as elected and informal leaders in the years prior to the strike widened the activist stratum, and the strike widened it still further. In periods of demobilization, however, extending awareness and involvement beyond this broad layer has proven difficult and has met with uneven success. If the analysis offered here has any purchase, the diffusion of leadership capacities beyond the activist stratum, in the interests of creating new activists among the marginal membership and shoring up departmental union strength, may involve decentralizing the power to engage more passive members and widen capacities in the departmental and faculty locales many identify most strongly with.[11]

Conclusion

Throughout the conflict, the strike was vilified as the action of a selfish minority of ideologically-motivated activists coercing a majority of frightened and unsympathetic members. The university administration, critics among the faculty, and media foes of the strike maintained that the membership had become hostages of a militant minority occupying the leadership of CUPE 3903. This ideological offensive climaxed in the decision to seek a forced ratification vote on the employer's offer, imposed over the

[11] M. Eisenscher, "Critical Juncture: Unionism at the Crossroads," in B. Nissen, ed. *Which Direction for Organized Labour?* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1999), p. 228.

will of the elected representatives of the union and the assembled membership, and justified as 'democratic'.

Notwithstanding the principle of accessible education for all lying at the heart of the dispute, the belief that the strike lacked a mass base was punctured decisively with the results of the forced vote, at which moment the Administration's strategy came crashing to the ground. If the Administration's hunch was correct—that members who feel they don't control their own union will vote against a leadership they view as acting not in their own interests—the results of the vote spoke volumes about the sense of ownership striking members of CUPE 3903 had regarding their union. The success in sustaining militancy and mobilization drew precisely on deep ties of collective self-identity, commitment and solidarity amongst members—especially graduate students who felt they had little to lose (in terms of strike pay or otherwise), and whose militancy often flowed from a deep-seated commitment to principles of social justice and equality. This feeling of solidarity traveled beyond the picket lines, and the organizing became infectious—leading to a rent-abatement campaign, strike support mobilization, undergraduate organizing and a tuition-refund campaign, an international student caucus, and the like. The individual radicalization and personal transformation that was a common if no less remarkable sight, in spite of the atomism and competitiveness of academic life, expressed these ties at an individual level.

However, the union's success in disabusing the Administration of its illusions in some ways has obscured limitations in the strike effort. While the strike successfully harnessed and even strengthened ties of trust and solidarity with militants, it lacked the organizational basis for the

permanent, continual organization, mobilization, and education of the rank-and-file at a decentralized level, independent of the standing invitation to participate to a varying degree in union-wide structures. As a result, the structures of democratic involvement had a limited capacity to fully integrate average members into the strike. Strike organization was *permeable* to new activists who could individually identify what needed to be done, make a case for doing it, and take the lead in carrying it out. But beyond accommodating spontaneous politicization and activation, it was less successful in *developing* new activists and expanding the capacities of the wider membership. It consequently lacked the organizational forms and educational emphasis that might best have ensured and perpetuated membership control—the forms of democratic participation it did have tended to draw in activists, but had limited reach for non-activists.

The absence of permanent decentralized structures to ensure the cultivation of rank-and-file initiative as a fundamental part of the strike, rather than an appreciated but additional contribution over and above picketing, partly explains why accomplishing tasks often required heroic efforts from individual activists working outside of structures (if informally alongside other individuals). With activists and militant informal leaders among the membership already playing such an encompassing role in determining executive, bargaining-committee, and strike-committee direction, the organizational forms of the strike were especially attuned to the immediate tasks of efficiently conferring over and executing the strike, less so to internal organizing or systematic deepening of member control. The dominance of militants at the base, and echoed in decisive

positions within the union structure, shifted attention from many on the margins that could have been productively incorporated into positions of greater empowerment and responsibility during the strike.

How union practice might be changed in order to bring about the education and active involvement of the wider membership remains a thorny question. A conventional, albeit cynical and ultimately self-defeating, answer is that allowing membership involvement to remain limited to a dedicated core of professionals is actually conducive to strengthening the union's ability to wage difficult struggles against unified and powerful adversaries.[12] A more constructive response will involve confronting the wider 'post-Seattle' condition that activists are themselves grappling with—an impatience with bureaucratic routines, and an affinity for practical and democratic organizational forms arising out of, and serving, the activism of members themselves. Loose structures of this sort are more likely to be responsive and transparent than more conventional and bureaucratic structures taking on a life of their own, independent of the needs of members.

Not least, this challenge to conventional union forms has the virtue of pointing out the inadequacy of raising organizational problems through a depoliticized and bureaucratized discussion of 'constitutional questions', instead of asking 'what forms are needed to deepen the organization, education and mobilization of our members that know nothing about our union?' That many would become involved in the strike, but shrink from union

[12] A recent statement of this argument can be found in S. Fraser, "Is Democracy Good for Unions?" *Dissent* 45:3 (Summer 1998).

involvement, suggests that organizational fetishism of this sort, in which the purpose of organization is obscured in the process of structure-building itself, will continue to hold little appeal for activists and non-activists alike. CUPE 3903 members commonly span a variety of activist organizations, each of which may be characterized by a different culture, make-up and purpose, and some of which are characteristically light on structure, such as affinity groups. The conventional 'ideal' of workers identifying principally with the union, or related forms that emerge directly from activist structures within the union (e.g., flying squads), appears likely to continue to give way to one in which activists see their union as one vehicle among many. Yet the ramifications of post-Seattle organizational practice are still unclear for union attempts to appeal to new activists while simultaneously building an enduring base in members' working lives. The possibility that CUPE 3903 might principally be of interest to members coming to union involvement as student-activists rather than worker-activists carries the risk, for instance, that the links between mobilization over workplace issues and external actions may ironically become less evident rather than more visible, or that the education and integration of non-activist members cease to be a focus of union energies.

Although its strengths were evident during the dispute, the disadvantages of limited internal organization have become more apparent in the rapid demobilization following the victory. Not long after the agreement was ratified, conflict with the administration re-emerged over members failing to receive retroactive pay according to the terms of the back-to-work protocol. Although these contract-administration issues afforded an opportunity to sustain

mobilization during the life of the agreement, the structures and culture encouraging members to want to sustain this do not exist, and even militant and activized stewards consequently find it difficult to resist the gravitation pull of Labour-Management Committee, the grievance procedure, and traditional forums for resolving such issues. Members' attention returned to departmental (e.g., Political Science) and faculty (e.g., Environmental Studies) struggles, despite crises in contract interpretation and administration at a union-wide level, and the union as a vehicle for large-scale mobilization over workplace issues was once more passed over.

At the union level itself, the fractures that re-emerged between bargaining units have further underscored the fragility of organic solidarities formed during the strike, and the unresolved problems of democratic organization. Substituting appeals to militancy for the process of developing democratic organizational forms capable of drawing skeptical members into an enduring and productive engagement with the union is unlikely to suffice. If anything, as the strike recedes in memory, this will be received as an evasion adding to the feeling, as the newly-elected Chief Steward Unit 2 put it soon after the strike, that members had "won the strike but lost the union."

Finally, perhaps most indicative of the reliance on existing militancy to the exclusion of developing inclusive and hegemonic forms for cultivating a wider activism, the absence of any sustained, critical discussion in the wake of the strike speaks volumes. Remarkably, a union-wide public discussion forum held two months after the strike attracted 25 leading activists to participate in a discussion confined to the questions, 'How did we win our strike? What were the strengths and weaknesses?' rather than, 'What did the experience of the strike tell us about the strengths and weaknesses of our union?' As important as the task is of distilling practical advice for a strike manual to assist other organizations, the strike has yet to produce any collective self-assessment and criticism in the union as a whole—despite the wealth of insights and constructive criticisms apparent from any casual inquiry into the opinion of the graduate students and contract faculty walking the picket lines.

In the years following the 1995 merger with CUPE, the union has strengthened its identity as an activist local, even as it struggled through a cyclical pattern of mobilization and member involvement as contract expiry approached, followed by demobilization. Since the strike, the union has only strengthened its reputation for solidarity and activism through its flying squad and its deep commitment to direct action around homelessness and poverty in Toronto. Yet the union is still not the central part of the workplace and members' consciousness it might be, and faces the same challenges familiar to much less democratic unionized workplaces—members don't grieve things, don't participate in the union between strikes, and often don't know about the union. Our union is significantly weaker in the workplace than it might be if stewards took on more of the tasks of active education, internal organizing, and building a local base in addition to grievance handling and transmitting information from the union leadership. Yet it is this sort of work that is necessary if the union's resources of camaraderie and solidarity are to be rekindled in preparation for the battles ahead:

Union activists and others who embrace this approach should support and become involved in efforts to implement it. For many union officials and union activists this commitment will require learning some new skills: to listen rather than instruct, to interact rather than direct, to engage in dialogue rather than polemics, to draw into discussion those who are accustomed to silent observation of what others have to say, to prevent those who always speak from dominating discussion. This path to transformation will require greater attention to involving and engaging members than does the path of mobilizing and motivating them.[13]

[13] M. Eisenscher, "Labor: Turning the Corner Will Take More than Mobilization," in R. Tillman and M. Cummings, eds. *The Transformation of U.S. Unions* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1999), p. 80.