

TO BE ON STRIKE

Marsha Niemeijer

Like everyone else, no doubt, I felt I had no time during the strike to write any sort of diary or notes on what was happening to us all, and what it meant to me, as it happened. During this strike (of CUPE 3903, at York University in Toronto) I was Chief Steward of Unit 3 (Graduate and Research Assistants, who were only just unionized, and were striking for a first contract).

This lack of appreciation for the moment comes at a real loss. It could well be a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Now, a few months later in Detroit (I had to leave the strike just before it ended – in a victory for the union!), trying to recall details, I realize how much I have forgotten. Fortunately I did take some time to write friends and family during the strike, and I kept all my sent emails. I have made use of the original emails to expand the ideas and fragments of reactions I was dealing with. Some of the moments I found myself to be focusing on are quite surprising (starting with the first one below involving... an email virus). Needless to say that the entries below all build up to a multifaceted image of what being on strike meant to me.

October 9th

Had a surprising call tonight, one of the executive members posted an urgent bargaining update to our listserv and it had a virus attached to it. Our 1000 plus members signed up on the listserv will be thrilled, to say the least.

I needed to immediately send out a message warning members not to open the email. Right now the intensity of preparing for the possibility of a strike makes all that remains to be done seem urgent. And there is so much to do, I have trouble figuring out how to prioritize it all in a logical 'to do list'. My day planner is one crazy list, day after day, of red 'to do' entries.

The pressure of preparing this as best as we can (and even that doesn't feel as if it's enough) is huge, as it progressively sinks in that this could well be for real. It would be dumb if we failed because of a lack of preparation. My mind is constantly mulling over things that need to be done, even during my sleep. What makes that preparation especially frustrating, is slowly understanding how, to a greater or lesser extent, we will undoubtedly be flying by the seat of our pants. Hopefully we'll master the skill of improvisation.

I constantly try to reassure myself that the administrators we are up against are not a well-oiled machine, and that surely they are trying to figure us out as much as we are of them (are they also furiously jotting down thoughts and waking up at night too?). However, some have been at their jobs for years now, and dealt with various bargaining rounds, whereas some of us are quite new at this all. What a scary time to be learning 'on the go'.

October 13th

The possibility of a strike looms larger than ever. Involved are many frustrations and fears (could we really be going on strike – a *real* strike, with *real* people and *real* lives?). However this is balanced out with the awesome

successes leading up to that possibility. The experience of seeing a union get together and collectively build for a strike is quite something. Each step we take with such determination increases my confidence tenfold. I have read about the adrenaline of collective actions, how strikes are the school where workers learn of solidarity. I have felt that adrenaline and I like where it's going. The union voted today to go on strike, and with an overwhelming "Yes!" Turnout could have been better overall, but we're thrilled nonetheless. What a resolved statement.

On the downside, our executive meeting today went on for six hours straight, and at that moment things seemed to be unravelling rather than coming together. This is turning into a hell of an exercise in socialist practice. Here and now we are putting into practice, in the content of our input in executive meetings, our various understandings of union politics. Naturally they clash, for this seems to be a moment when even small differences become all important. Stress and probably a real sense of the gravity for the moment create explosive opinions. How to navigate through all the differences – personal differences, political differences – in why we're in this, in what we're seeking to achieve, and so forth?

October 17th

Strike preparation is proceeding seriously. If I could I would already have had a few naps in the union office, as I feel that I'm practically living there. I'm totally revved up, in a good and bad way. I went along with the bargaining team today, to figure out yet again where the administration is at

regarding the Unit 3 scope clause (defining who is recognized as a member of the union and who isn't). As expected I came out of that meeting feeling deceived. And on top of that we got our first Unit 3 base salary offer, which entails a wage cut of fifty percent. Yeah right.

I am incredibly worried about the lack of clarity around Unit 3 members, in terms of their union membership status. The list we got a few days ago has been altered again by the administration. My political science department (which is a big one) is still nearly in its entirety excluded. I can't figure out how York is interpreting the scope clause. It would be so much easier if they would just stick to one interpretation, even if its a bad one for us. I wouldn't feel as if the ground keeps on getting yanked out from under me, when I yet again realize how I have in fact mis-interpreted their interpretation. It's as if I'm chasing my own tail, round and round.

We're starting to think they're simply pushing us out on strike. The thought of being out is daunting. The thought of being amongst those that make the final decision to strike, however much the members have said they're ready to go out is even more daunting. What if we lose? Fortunately we now have a commitment from CUPE National that they will give strike pay to unrecognized Unit 3 members, as long as I reasonably deem them to be members based on our fair reading of the scope clause.

One thing is clear—I'll never seek to be chief steward of a new bargaining unit that has such a confusing scope clause (open to multiple interpretations). It's only clear cut scope clauses for me from now on.

October 21st

I made a confusing intervention in our last pre-strike general members meeting (GMM) today. The main goal in the union of late has been to build solidarity across the three bargaining units. A strike would certainly focus on something specific to each unit. Yet the question of having one or more units stay out for another unit, when their own demands could already have been met, remains a tough one, however noble the principle of inter-unit solidarity. It raises constant doubts. What if the demands for Unit 3 are indeed unrealistic? What if Unit 3 doesn't come together as a unit (indeed, what a scary time to have this unit be called to life)? What if Unit 3 lacks its own internal solidarity to back up the precise Unit 3 demands that are now part of what is pushing us out on strike? I have to believe it will, as much as I believe that the crux of those demands are just and deserve the unqualified support of the other units. It is this that I expressed in the meeting.

We're getting so close to our tentative strike date. Right now I feel like every single minute I spent in the midst of this is a learning, eye-opening, and angst-ridden moment. That's intense.

October 25th

Well, we did it. The executive voted to go on strike, tomorrow at 7 AM. What an unforgettable moment, voting for a strike, knowing that it's going to happen... tomorrow. We could have cut the air with a knife. But little time to savour the moment – we had to get cracking on moving the

rest of the union office into strike headquarters. The irony is that only today did I officially get added as recognized member of Unit 3. It's only a final formality, as I have felt part of this union for a while now, but still, I am now a *unionized* worker, with union card to show.

November 9th

Let's chat soon. Don't let me talk too much about the strike. I need to feel as if I have a life outside of all this. Yet, to be honest, I would not want to miss this. I am living through so much, and know that I am being shaped by the strike, which is mind-boggling (I was going to say 'awesome'). Today someone asked where I was from when I said that. It was the portable potties guy, when I called him at 7am to get him to come clean a toilet that some lunatics knocked over last night. Believe me, it was 'awesome' when he said he'd be right on it). Just recently the union was told to leave York's 'private property', which our members decided to ignore. We risked being arrested. A dimension of being on strike that I had not given much thought to in advance. The energy this excitement gives is great. I'm sure I'll end up wanting to give you all the details. Of course I do have some energy to focus on non-union things. Will Gore win the US elections? He had better.

So, I'm kind of torn as what to think of this all. Every day I head up to our strike trying to convince myself that if I see this as just a job, I might be a little less stressed out by the end of the day, and it won't have seemed so all-consuming. But it obviously isn't just a job and within the first few hours I'm right back into the sheer intensity of it all. However,

each and every day constitutes an incredible learning experience (and I've truly never dealt with such a steep learning curve). I hope I'll keep on being able to see that, and soak it all up. That is a real force driving me in this, day in, day out. These moments of grounding experiences are rare. It beats reading about past strikes. That I'm also in this for our struggle is, of course, a given.

Despite feeling more and more tired, I do constantly tell myself that 'si se puede'. I often think of the simple necessity of doing this that Brecht expressed in one of my favourite poems.

"And I Always Thought"

And I always thought: the very simplest words
Must be enough. When I say what things are like
Everyone's heart must be torn to shreds.
That you'll go down if you don't stand up for yourself
Surely you see that.

November 20th

We're still on strike, our fourth week. Bargained has resumed. Talks were going nowhere at all last week. Striking yet not bargaining. Very disturbing. But we are keeping busy.

Morale remains high, and each day I feel proud to be a member of this local. Some of the issues we're striking for are not straight-cut bread and butter issues. And yet we're holding our ground. Current Teaching Assistants are out there walking the lines, four hours a day, five days of the week, for future Teaching Assistants (they have been

promised tuition protection, with the understanding that all new Teaching Assistants be excluded and forced to pay fully deregulated, constantly increasing, tuition fees).

The various lines are all consolidating in their own ways, with one having organized their own soup kitchen, another having regular dancing pickets. I am always on the lookout for a few members who have been adding colour to their line with wigs. People come together and plan such incredible activities. Many more people than I would have ever thought are showing such resiliency and imagination in face of this, not to mention a commitment to civil disobedience. I have a lot of fun making sure they all have what they need. My current constant worry is to find firewood for all the barrels.

The rallies and off-campus events we hold are fantastic. At one of the rallies we took the members on a little direct action stunt that we'd kept secret. This entailed a march through some of the main parts of campus, singing 'Solidarity Forever' and a bunch of chants, booing at some members of the employers bargaining team that happened to show up at the worst time possible, and then went up to the office of the university president, Lorna Marsden. She was presented – in her office, as she had security lock the place – with a bad boss award in the form of a statue of a screw, to represent how badly she's screwing us. While there, about 100 of us crammed in a tiny hallway, we sang for a few minutes, with the walls literally trembling, 'we will not back down'. A wonderful moment, and a hell of a boost to all present.

But I am exhausted too. Had a 12 hour shift today, and know that this will be yet another week of six am shifts that usually last until at least seven pm. The days are too long. I

yearn for a change of pace, yet wonder if that is reasonable. We must all be tired and must all find the passion and energy to continue. The union and the struggles we're waging are all consuming. I'm at the stage where I'm finding myself ready to interrogate everyone I work with in the union. I'm increasingly realizing that all these people that I've intensely spent the past weeks with, who I now chat easily with, as if I've known them for years – that I know little about some of them outside of the union. All that we live, talk and walk, is focused on the union. Even during the rare relaxing moments.

But I also find myself regretting that I do not have more time to immerse myself even more deeply in this all; so that I could experience sides of a strike that I am missing out on. I have yet to spend four solid hours walking a picket line. I have not had to deal with scabs, or angry people wanting to cross. What does it feel like to build up a culture at a gate, work on working together, debate strike issues, agreeing and disagreeing?

December 10th

I'm hanging in, but it's harrowing. Yet the intensity continues to build. Our executive meetings are getting even longer, positions are being carved out in a more determined fashion. I find myself wavering between simply caving in to decisions, even if I do support them, out of fatigue, and adamantly refusing to back off other decisions. Having gotten this far I know that I have learnt an incredible amount on playing the politics of a group such as this executive. I know this goes for other executive members too: a weird

skill to have learnt. Ideally it would be so much nicer if 'we all just got along'!

December 16th

I'm done. We have found someone to replace me, as I prepare to move to Detroit. Despite the doubts and exhaustion it will be disconcerting, to walk away from this while our members are still out there. That change of pace that I finally wanted, well it's near. How to let go though?

Next week I'll be doing some picket coordinating, for our last week of picket lines before the university closes. A welcome change, time to soak up some of what life is like on the lines. My last few days were nonetheless exhilarating. Went from turning up at a hotel room door at 5am in the morning, where our bargaining team was caucusing, so that they could give the executive the details of what seemed to be an insufficient deal (the members refused to accept it at a GMM), to getting an unexpected standing ovation at my last GMM.

Even though Unit 2 (Contract Faculty) seems ready to go back and accept the deal negotiated during the night, the rest of the union seems so strong. I now understand inter-unit solidarity, as I heard it expressed in most members determined speeches that there was no going back until Unit 3 got more. Wow. I have so much processing to do, in terms of wrapping my head around this experience, especially when it comes to having been involved in this new bargaining unit in the union. It was great to see that no less than five people wanting to become Chief Steward Unit 3. The strike has indeed put Unit 3 on the map. In an

unexpected way the strike was the best thing that could have happened in terms of building a unit.

December 22nd

Spent a few hours today piecing together a summary of the main weeks of our strike, for another email blitz.

Thursday (Oct. 26th)— CUPE 3903 goes on strike at York University.

Week 1 (Oct. 30th) - York University claims the Union does not want to meet. We disclaim this constantly, stating that we are on strike because of the concessionary bargaining being forced on us. We are ready to meet provided we are not asked to consider any rollback to our expired contract. We are also on strike for a fair first contract for graduate and research assistants. Towards the end of the week the employer announces bargaining will resume.

Week 2 (Nov. 6th) - The employers externally hired lawyer is not available immediately and it takes them four days to arrange for resumption of bargaining. The very next day after talks have resumed the employer declares that the union has not respected previously agreed upon picket protocol and threatens the Union with trespassing and eviction off their private property. The Union stays put.

Week 3 (Nov. 13th) - Bargaining is extremely slow. The Union moves on significant issues, but continues to be met

with a stony NO to our demands. A tough decision is made to remain at the table.

Week 4 (Nov. 20th) - Bargaining resumes, with a government appointed mediator. At the same time, the employer resorts to scandalous acts against our picketers. They remove our safety equipment from 'their' property and delay all attempts the Union undertakes to have the equipment returned to us. They turn off the lights at one of the entrances to York University during a night shift. They send a fax to the national media and police claiming that our members have been involved in illegal activities, such as laying booby traps (all accusations have yet to be substantiated). The police get involved and the Union is forced to phase out the use of some of our safety equipment.

Week 5 (Nov. 27th) - The employer breaks off talks at the last minute, and states that they will only return to the table if we indicate a willingness to move significantly on outstanding issues. We have moved on some of those issues and return their insulting statement saying that they are employing bullying tactics, that we will not bargain with conditions and that it is time that the employer show some movement. At the same time York University Senate restructures the Fall Semester in such a way that even if we were to settle in December, our members would have no work to go back to until January 2001.

Week 6 (Dec. 4th) - No talks all week. We spend time diversifying our actions, and constantly request that York University's bargaining team get back to the table.

Week 7 (Dec. 11th) - Bargaining finally resumes for a third round. The employer tables a final offer 30 minutes before our weekly general members meeting. The bargaining team explains the offer to our members, who reject it flatly. The bargaining team does not recommend it to the executive for ratification and the executive votes overwhelmingly against bringing the offer to the members for ratification. At the same time the members decide that too many members are out of town to make any further ratification possible until the first week of January.

Week 8 (Dec. 18th) - The union continues to broaden the struggle we are waging for accessible quality public education. Members participate in rallies against Bill 132, which would allow for private universities in Ontario. While we wait for bargaining to resume we are notified that the employer has filed for a forced ratification vote with the Ontario Ministry of Labour.

BUT - WE WILL OBVIOUSLY NOT BACK DOWN!!!

In solidarity, CUPE 3903

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CUPE 3903

December 31st

We're still on strike and still reeling from the news of upcoming forced ratification vote that the government is going to hold. The provincial government is getting quite

involved and leaking silly news, like threatening to relocate the 33,000 undergrads to other universities in the New Year. Although the York administration opposes this too, it does fuel unsympathetic public opinion. We've been dealing with horrible defamatory columns in national media. While stopping for a coffee en route to Montreal for a short break, I ripped an Ibbitson column out of the *Globe & Mail*, and allowed it to spoil my trip for a bit. Jerk. We sure as hell are being watched by the powers that be. Must be doing something right.

I'm off to Detroit next week. Delayed my departure so that I could register my 'no' vote. This might be a good way for me to quit though. I couldn't have a better chance than this one to vehemently tell York that there is no way they can break all we've put into this by letting them dictate the terms of when we go back. No way.