

HOT UNDER THE COLLAR

Notes from a Help Desk

I want to give a small example of something that happened to me this week at work (I am a help desk worker and occasional network admin) for a General Electric subsidiary ("they're the worst Generals of all you know!"). The help desk is scheduled to be partially outsourced to India. The company is outsourcing Level 1 support, mostly initial call taking and opening of cases. This decision has basically been made and now they have a project team to 'study the feasibility', i.e. justify the move. The jackass leading this project doesn't know a computer from an Etch-a-Sketch and has no idea about what kind of work we do, our workload, etc. Nor does he really care.

All he wants is to get rid of a few of us, and speed up response and resolution times. i.e. work faster, produce more, then we can really prove we didn't need you!

One of the people I work with, who lives in a fairly well off suburb and who is a sort of All-American blonde ex-jock, with maybe some Green Party leanings, looks at all of us and says "Let's get the bastard in

here for a week. Make him start by trying to do his job as we field all the phone calls, run around, do projects, etc. Then after two days, let's make him answer a call an hour and have him still try to do his other job. Then let's leave him alone to answer calls, as happens to us on a fairly frequent basis, while the rest of us go fix problems." So far, he just wants him to taste the pain. But then he says, "Better yet, let's bring down one system everyday so he can see what we really have to face from time to time. We'll bring down a different server each day. That should fucking teach him!"

Now, will we do it? Pro'ly not at that level. But will this guy get a roasting while he is there? You bet. Regardless of

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Mike Mosher

the conscious political beliefs of the people I work with (mostly pro-company), they are ready to challenge the company suck-up and cause problems in production in order to protect themselves. Would anyone see this if they did not work on this helpdesk? No. Will it cost GE some money and stick it to this management jerk? Yes. Is it class struggle? You bet. Is it enough to overthrow capital? Of course not. But it did open a discussion, once again, of what the company is about, about what it means to be a worker, about profit over our needs, etc. My co-workers, with no intervention from me, opened a space for contesting capital in some small way and that also opened a space for discussion. Could I have

planned that? Probably not.

Every smart organizer I know, whether unionist or communist, recognizes that you can't force this kind of thing or create it. That may fly in the face of Leninist and unionist ideas of leadership, but that is also why so many 'militants' leave these organizations and why they can only rarely attract creative political people who stay.

It opens different ideas about what it means to be a revolutionary, a communist. It means not pretending to lead. Not pretending to have a worked out strategy and set of tactics. Rather, what we bring are ideas, ideas that we try to offer as ways of understanding why such and such happened;

that it will happen again and why; and how there are ways out. In other words, ways to change the world that reside in our collective self-determination, and not in the right party or the right program. Walking we listen. Or as they used to say, you gotta walk a mile in her shoes.

If we do our job, then we respond to struggles, help them clarify both during and after, and we try to act personally and live in a way that is worth emulating, that is rich in life and struggle. The Leninists I know are usually awful examples of human lives. They are the most over-worked gerbils in a wheel I know and so many of them are so damn boring. There is a great value to the Situationist critique of 'militantism' (not that we can do nothing, but it changes the scope and nature of our interventions.)

Anyway, that's a bit of a tangent and too one-sided, but it is too often left out. Revolution is about living differently, not as isolated individuals, but in struggle. I am a communist not because I



have a love of the oppressed, but because I am oppressed and the only way out is collectively.

Yours in struggle,
Chris W., Chicago, IL., USA

POSTSCRIPT: The management hack never showed up, but some systems mysteriously, and not so mysteriously, did experience problems. Due to a gas company workers' strike, the scabs doing tasks cut MCI's data lines in Chicago, taking down our phone and data for a whole day. Also, some changes were made to the servers that locked a large number of people out of the system. Who made that change? No one knows. Gremlins? •

On the Lines at York University

Fighting Neoliberalism in Post-Secondary Education

On January 11, 2001, a 78 day strike by teaching, research and graduate assistants (TAs/RA/GAs) at York University ended. The strike at Canada's third largest university, the longest such in Canadian history, was different from many in the postsecondary sector in that it resulted in a fairly substantial victory for the strikers. Through years of effort, the unionized York University workers managed to secure a good contract. A loss would have had devastating effects on post-secondary education workers across Canadian campuses. In broader terms, in order for the neoliberal agenda of privatization and marketization of post-secondary education to be fully implemented, defenders of accessible quality education—of which Local 3903 has been in the forefront in Canada—must be brought to heel or, even better (from the view of the bosses), eliminated entirely.

The proposals made by York administration were typical of the corporatization drive in other public service sectors: privatization, reduced job security and reductions in wages and benefits. The political character of the strike and its importance in the battle against neoliberal marketization of post-secondary education were reflected in two of the major issues being fought over in the strike: tuition indexation and those of job security and promotion.

The union, fighting for principles of universality and accessibility, was committed to tuition relief for future as well as current TAs and GA/RAs. Tuition indexation, a fee rebate which increases dollar-for-dollar with tuition, offers some protection against the tuition increases which have eroded the already limited accessibility of post-secondary education in Canada. Current union TAs had this protection but the university was seeking to eliminate it for future members through a "grandparent" clause. Losing indexation in the only local to have it would have been a crushing blow for locals with contracts due such as at Carleton (Ottawa), and McMaster (Hamilton). Since full-time registration is a requirement for holding a TAship or GA/RAship, tuition

works as a ready-made mechanism for management to take back any gains workers might win. In this way the university works much like a company store: no matter how much wages are increased, workers always find themselves owing something more.

The tuition requirement also represents a discriminatory employment arrangement which distinguishes TAs and RA/GAs from all other York employees. Other university workers, whether professors, secretaries or maintenance staff enjoy free tuition at York for themselves and their families. The same tuition waiver holds for TAs at most universities in the US.

After tuition, and even with the protection offered by indexation, TAs at York are left with an income of \$9,749.28 (Canadian) per year, substantially below the Toronto poverty line of \$17,132. The situation for RA/GAs is even worse. York offered them a minimum of \$4,500, not even enough to pay the \$5,184.72 tuition costs. In addition, all graduate students since 1996/97 have been required to pay tuition in the summer even if they are finished with course work, which amounts to the world's most expensive library card.

The enormous tuition increases of recent years have been permitted, indeed encouraged, by federal government cuts to education funding and at the provincial level through deregulation of tuition fees for graduate and professional programs. At the same time the budgets of research funding bodies have suffered reductions and freezes. Most schools, including York, have eliminated graduate post-residence fees which previously protected graduate students from paying full fees once their coursework was finished. This has had a disastrous impact on students as it represents a doubling of previous fees for each year except the first in programs which can take over six years to complete. It has also played nicely into the hands of university administrators as the pressures on students to find off-campus work to make up the tuition increases has lengthened completion times for many students. The administration's refusal to offer livable wages suggests a commitment to student poverty, debt and, inevitably, decreased enrollment by students from low-income backgrounds. Another major plank in the corporatization agenda in post-secondary education has been movement away from secure tenure-track positions towards increased reliance on contract faculty. Efforts by university administrations to keep contract faculty working without even minimal job security provisions is a key part of the requirement to "flexibilize" labour as campuses are made to fit the lean production models of other sectors. Contract faculty at York currently have to apply for their jobs every four to eight months regardless of seniority. Even those who have taught a course for 20 years have to re-apply to teach it, with no guarantee that they will be rehired. To protect against this, Local 3903 fought for an

increase in the number of conversions of contract faculty to tenure stream.

The university's intransigence speaks to the political character of the negotiations and suggests that the administration believed it had powerful support for its actions. The administration hired a Chief Negotiator from an infamous union-busting section of the Heenan Blakie law firm. The same negotiator worked for administrations during faculty strikes against York and Trent Universities.

Interestingly, York President Lorna Marsden sits on the Boards of Directors for corporations which donated over \$28,000 to the same Conservative Ontario government which deregulated graduate fees and is constructing a bill to allow private universities in the province. Her political connections run even deeper, as she is the former Vice-President of the Liberal Party of Canada, the very party which set the stage for tuition deregulation by cutting education transfers to the provinces.

The York Board of Governors consists primarily of corporate Directors and CEOs. For example, one Governor authored a 1996 report recommending that the Provincial government deregulate tuition fees, a proposal which has been given life in a Bill currently [March, 2001] going through readings in the Ontario legislature. Another Board member is CEO and Chair of the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce, which administers student loans and profits from the increased student debts related to costly tuition.

Solidarity/Picket Strength

The only way that strikers were able to withstand the assaults by strike breakers, theft of fire barrels and safety gates, threats of arrests and a government sponsored forced ratification vote was through militance on the picket line and tremendous solidarity given by supporters on and off of campus. Local 3903 has a long history as an activist local, forming flying squads to support other unions and community groups and doing much support work for militant organizations like the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP). During the strike this solidarity was returned tremendously.

Autoworkers provided food to picketers nearly every day of the strike; steelworkers and high school teachers showed up to strengthen lines when the university president threatened to bus students in; undergraduate students organized occupations and rallies against the administration; student groups like the Iranian Students' Association brought snacks and cheerful greetings; university workers showed up from other cities to walk the lines; day care workers — themselves enduring a six month strike (now seven and counting) and OCAP, always ready when threats of cops were on the lips of administrators — all of these people came out and

showed the kind of solidarity that is necessary to win.

Thankfully there was a consistent core of militants who took the time to confront union bureaucrats over strategies and tactics and to ensure the autonomy of pickets and the priorities of rank-and-file decision-making on the lines. When picket captains cheered cop actions against scabs, militants reminded them that the cops are not our friends. When union leaders warned against trying to stop strike-breakers from jumping the line or chastized strikers for getting in front of jumpers, militants reminded them what a picket line is all about and made it clear that such reprimands were unacceptable.

It's a fact, usually denied or unnoticed by union bureaucrats, that strikes are won on the picket line. At York, militance and strength on the line made the difference even in the face of less than confident union leaders who too often seemed to think that politeness and kindness towards strikebreakers would carry the day.

by Jeff Shantz

Silicon Valley DeBug

Thankfully, not all of the sharp young workers in the new economy bought into the nonsense that high-tech is a benign industry, free from pollution and labor abuses. A group calling itself "Silicon Valley DeBug: The Voice of the Young and Temporary," had those illusions shattered years ago, thanks to temp work on high-tech assembly lines and in chemical-suffused chipmaking "clean rooms."

These days, the group is busy posting tales of toil on their website at <http://www.siliconvalleydebug.com>, upstaging the complainers on <http://www.fuckedcompany.com> with stories from some truly fucked companies. Read the work-diary of Shana White, a 20-year old temporary receptionist at Bell Micro Products in San Jose, whose 40-year old mother assembles printed circuit boards in the back room. Over lunch, her mother routinely complains of chemical spills and headaches from fumes and fluxes, many of which contain known neurotoxins. An immigrant from Nicaragua, the mother is just happy to have a job.

Read also the story of a blood-and-cyanide packer for Abbot Labs; an HP Laserjet assembler working for Manpower; and a clean-room worker kicking a crank habit — yet another incidental exposure from chip manufacturing's 12-hour shifts. Clean chemistry, indeed.

by Jim Fisher

