

Developing Workers Autonomy

An Anarchist Look At Flying Squads

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Recently much interest and discussion has been generated by the emergence of union flying squads in Ontario. Flying squads — rapid response networks of workers that can be mobilized for strike support, demonstrations, direct action and working class defense of immigrants, poor people, and unemployed workers — present a potentially significant development in revitalizing organized labor activism and rank-and-file militancy.

Here are organizations with rank-and-file participation working to build solidarity across unions and locals and alongside community groups, engaging in direct action while striving to democratize their own unions. No wonder then that the re-appearance of flying squads in Ontario, in a context of halting resistance to a vicious neoliberal attack, notably among some sectors of the labor movement, has been cause for much excitement.

Militant anti-capitalists of various stripes, recognizing the crucial roles played by workers within production relations, have viewed the flying squads as important in the development of workers' organization against capitalist authority and discipline. Anarchists, maintaining the necessity of working class self-organization and autonomy from bureaucratic structures, have been encouraged by the possible emergence of active networks of rank-and-file workers bringing collective resources to defend broad working class interests.

At the same time the struggles over the make up and control or direction of flying squads has reflected struggles between rank-and-file members and union bureaucracies more generally. Most accounts have been so caught up in the excitement generated by the emergence of the flying squads that they have not addressed critically the obstacles and difficulties faced by flying squads as they attempt to build on a truly rank-and-file basis. Similarly, these hopeful accounts fail to take stock of the current, diminished, status of the flying squad movement in Ontario, substituting promise for reality.

Rank-And-File Groups

The flying squad is a rapid response group of members who are ready to mobilize on short notice to provide direct support for pickets or actions. It may or may not be a recognized body of the local. The flying squad structure may consist of little more than phone lists and meetings but, significantly, should maintain its autonomy from the local and national union executives. Generally flying squads should be open only to rank-and-file members since they must be free to initiate and take actions that the leadership may not approve of. Some flying squads refuse even a budget line item so that they are in no way dependent upon leadership. In Canada, flying squads have offered crucial support to direct actions around immigration defense, tenant protection, squatters rights, and welfare support by mobilizing sizeable numbers of unionists who are prepared for actions without regard to legality. Flying squads take direct action to interfere with bosses' abilities to make profits. Not limited in their scope of action by specific collective agreements or workplaces, flying squads mobilize for community as well as workplace defense.

Working groups are generally recognized bodies that are established to deal with specific areas of need. They step beyond the limitations of traditional unionism to assist both members and non-members. Rank-and-file and community alliances offer one example of how to make the connections which are crucial to developing militant working class solidarity. They can bring anti-capitalist activists, community members and unionists together to work on a day-to-day basis.

Rank-and-file committees and flying squads can become important parts of struggles over a broad spectrum of issues affecting working class community life, including those which the mainstream unions ignore such as housing and unemployment. They can offer spaces for building bridges between workers, across unions and industries and between union and community groups. Autonomous from traditional union structures and organized around militant non-hierarchical practices, rank-and-file working groups and flying squads can provide real opposition to conservatism within the unions as well. They provide a better approach than the more common model of the “left caucus” which tries to reform union policy, usually, again, through resolutions at conventions (Clarke, 2002). The rank-and-file committees actively and directly challenge the leadership within their own locals and across locals.

Flying squads of various types have long been an important part of labor militancy internationally. In Britain, community flying pickets successfully mobilized to defend hospitals in working class neighborhoods against closure in the 1970s. In India several farmers’ unions recently formed flying squads to confront officials at purchase centers to ensure that their demands for proper payment for their crops were satisfied. Members of the Carpenters Union in southern California, who were primarily immigrants, many of them undocumented, used flying squads and direct action effectively during the framers’ strike of 1995.

While some type of rank-and-file organizing, along the lines of what we now call flying squads, has been a constant in labor movements, the contemporary flying squads in Ontario are inspired by the flying pickets that emerged during the CIO strikes of the 1930s. Flying squads played an important part in the 1945 UAW strike against Ford in Windsor. That strike, which won the rights associated with the Rand Formula (union recognition, dues check off and closed shop) for workers in Canada, turned when strikers organized an incredible vehicle picket in which the entire Ford plant was surrounded and shut down by several rows of vehicles. Flying squads were used effectively to mobilize people for actions throughout the strike and to spread information throughout the community.

Not coincidentally, the contemporary flying squads in Ontario made their reappearance in several Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) locals in Windsor during the mid-1990s as a mobilization force for actions against the newly elected neoliberal provincial government (See Levant, 2003: 20). The network within the CAW spread during organizing of the Ontario Days of Action, rotating, city-by-city one-day mass strikes against the Tories. In the midst of a lengthy strike against Falconbridge mining, during which picketers were subjected to ongoing violence by company goons and security thugs, members of CAW local 598 initiated a regional Northern Flying Squad to reinforce and defend the lines and step up the struggle against the company. They helped to organize a solidarity weekend that brought flying squads from across Ontario for militant actions against Falconbridge, actions that many consider to have been the high point of the strike.

My union, CUPE 3903, inspired by the CAW flying squads and the direct action movements against capitalist globalization, formed a flying squad three years ago to support OCAP’s direct action casework around immigration defense and welfare support as well strike solidarity and organizing direct actions within mass anti-capitalist demonstrations. The flying squad is currently made up of more than 80 members who are ready to mobilize on short notice to provide direct support for pickets or actions. Significantly, the flying squad maintains its autonomy from the union executive, refusing even a budget line item. 3903 has already made it known that it is willing to do direct action training and to hold workshops on forming and developing flying squads.

In early September, 2001, OCAP along with the 3903 flying squad went directly to Pearson International Airport to demand an end to threats of deportation against three families. Leaflets were given to passengers alerting them to the situation and a visit was paid to the Immigration Canada deportation office in the basement of Terminal One. OCAP demanded and received a meeting with the airport's Immigration management and gave a deadline of the end of the business day for management to issue stays of removal in all three instances. All three deportations were eventually cancelled. This unusual result, in which the removal dates were cancelled prior to a Federal Court challenge, is a testament to the powers of direct action.

It must also be stressed that the presence of flying squads has been crucial in the success of this and other actions. Clearly government officials, security and cops respond differently when confronted with a room packed with workers holding union flags and banners than when confronted with a smaller numbers of people that they are willing to dismiss as activists. Through such actions, the flying squad demonstrates how organizations of rank-and-file workers can step out of traditional concerns with the workplace to act in a broadened defense of working class interests. The expansion of union flying squads, with autonomy from union bureaucracies, could provide a substantial response to the state's efforts to isolate immigrants and refugees from the larger community. The emboldened aggressiveness of Immigration Canada after September 11 makes such actions in defense of working class people absolutely crucial.

In addition 3903 is home to vital working groups with real links to community struggles. In November, 2001, 3903 provided an office and resources for OCAP to work along with members of the 3903 Anti-Poverty Working Group. The working group moves beyond the limitations of traditional unionism to assist people (members and non-members) experiencing problems with collection agencies, landlords, bosses and police and to help anyone having difficulties with welfare or other government bureaucracies. The new office provides a possibly significant example of a rank-and-file initiative that forges community alliances while fighting the local implementation of the global neoliberal agenda. This type of alliance offers one example of how to make the connections which are crucial to growing our movements. Indeed, it brings anti-globalization activists and unions together to work on a day-to-day basis.

Bureaucracy Against The Flying Squads

The national and local executives of some unions in which flying squads have emerged have clearly shown concern about this development. This has played out particularly badly within the CAW.

During the summer of 2001, people in cities, reserves and towns throughout Ontario were gearing up for a campaign of economic disruption which would directly confront and interfere with the political programs and economic practices of the government and their corporate backers. This effort suffered something of a setback when the CAW leadership decided to withdraw support from the campaign in June. The decision came following a mock eviction of the Finance Minister from his constituency office by OCAP, students and members of CAW and CUPE flying squads. The National President of the CAW, Buzz Hargrove, was so upset by the action that he agreed to meet with the Labor Minister to discuss union support of OCAP. In an inexplicable act of collaboration, Hargrove sat down to establish union policy with the man who had only

months before introduced legislation gutting the Employment Standards Act and extending the legal workweek from 44 to 62 hours.

Significantly, not only did Hargrove cut OCAP's largest source of funding, but he also clamped down on the CAW flying squads which were only beginning to grow. CAW flying squads were brought under control of the National by requiring approval of the National or of local presidents prior to any action. The National even tried to prohibit use of CAW shirts, hats and banners at actions not sanctioned by the National. Thus the CAW leadership cynically used the excuse of the eviction to camp down on a rank-and-file movement that it saw as a possible threat to its authority. The strangling of the flying squads by the bureaucrats may be one of the sharpest blows rank-and-file activists have suffered recently and will deeply hurt fightback efforts in Ontario.

These actions effectively derailed actions in major industrial centers like Windsor, where activists, recognizing the vulnerability of just-in-time production in Windsor and Detroit, had initially planned to blockade the Ambassador Bridge, the main U.S.-Canada node in the NAFTA-superhighway. Stopping traffic on the bridge for even a short period of time would have caused millions of dollars in damages because of the reliance on just-in-time production in the factories on both sides of the border. This possibility was not lost on Hargrove, who let it slip during a meeting with representatives of OCAP Allies when he angrily voiced his concern that in Windsor some members were talking about shutting down production at "our plants."

At this point it seems that the CAW bureaucracy's clampdown on the flying squads is complete. At a panel discussion on creative tactics that I took part in at this year's Labor Notes conference, Michelle Dubiel, a CAW "Ontario Chapter" flying squad representative, stated with great satisfaction that marshals had finally been instituted in the CAW flying squads. Dubiel noted that there had been much discussion and some resistance to this but happily concluded that members were eventually brought to see the necessity of marshals.

The impact of this takeover of the flying squads has been lethal in some areas. A comrade in Sudbury recently told me that the northern flying squads were virtually extinct. Similarly the rank-and-file, cross-local flying squad in Windsor has not been able to get off the ground.

Leninist Reformism: Flying Squads As Left Opposition

Some Leninists and their Trotskyist sidekicks have viewed the flying squads primarily as a means of union reform, a companion piece of the left caucus' loyal opposition to the union leadership. A prime example of this approach is expressed by Alex Levant, (who has put much work into building my union's flying squad and is currently a vice president in the local), in a recent article in 'New Socialist' magazine (March/April, 2003).

Levant poses the problem for rank-and-file activism largely as one of "conservative leaders who practice 'business unionism'" (Levant, 2003: 22). Levant (2003: 22) suggests that flying squads "pose a threat to such union leaders' positions by fostering membership activism, which bolsters left opposition currents in these unions." Business unionism, far from being a preference of specific leaders, however, is a structured relationship, legally and organizationally, within unions and between unions and bosses. Levant (2003: 22) is correct to suggest that such locals "contribute to the crisis of working-class self-organization by discouraging members' self-activity", but this crisis will not be overcome by replacing conservative leaders with leftist ones.

Nor should we accept that social unionism is not still a form of business unionism. This is shown clearly in the case of the CAW, which has long practiced “social unionism.”

Taking the left opposition perspective, Levant is unable or unwilling to openly or directly criticize bureaucrats in the CAW for their ongoing efforts to control that union’s flying squads. In his article Levant quotes CAW representative Steve Watson approvingly while making no mention of his role in the CAW breaking of the rank-and-file aspects of the flying squads. Notably, at the above-mentioned anti-deportation action at the airport, it was Watson who intervened at the last minute to keep CAW flying squads from participating, even though many workers at the airport are CAW members, and could have played an important part in stopping the deportation.

Similarly, while Levant is rightly critical of the Ontario Federation of Labor Solidarity Network, which required permission of the OFL bureaucracy to undertake any action, he has been less critical of similar developments within our own flying squad. At a meeting in July 2003 it was determined that the flying squad would be coordinated by no more than 3 members who have a number of responsibilities including, crucially, the responsibilities of maintaining the membership list and calling and organizing the flying squad’s actions. Ideally all members should have access to the membership list and be able to initiate calls for actions. Creating coordinator positions with this authority is a troubling and potentially dangerous development. During an earlier meeting where the coordinator structure was challenged by members who favored getting the lists to every member and canceling the coordinator positions, several members who take the Trotskyist approach and supported the coordinator structure walked out, purposefully blowing quorum just before the vote.

I do agree with Levant that the flying squads have a tremendous potential in building rank-and-file militancy and self-organization. However, that potential can only be met if autonomy from the leadership is established and defended with vigilance. Flying squads do NOT “work best” when they “respect” the roles of the leadership as Levant advocates. Flying squads work best when they understand the roles the leadership plays, including the role of taming and reigning in members’ self-organizing initiatives.

Notes On The Buearucracy

For all of their potential power, the trade unions are restricted by a leadership that cannot allow decisive force to be unleashed. To understand the difficulties facing rank-and-file resistance we must understand the roles and structures of leadership beyond a focus on conservative or progressive union leaders. In Ontario, during the 1930 and 1940s waves of union organizing, wildcat strikes and occupations pressed a tactical retreat on the bosses and their state, leading to the extension of new rights to workers’ organizations.

In place of open class war, a process of limited and uneven concession granting was established. This truce had the effect of regulating and compartmentalizing workplace struggles to keep them below the level of serious disruption. Each industry, workplace or section of workers was viewed as having its own issues to attend to or, indeed, to bargain over. A new layer of union functionary emerged to broker and execute this deal. These union executives needed to placate membership with regulated contract gains while simultaneously ensuring labor force stability and an environment conducive to accumulation for the bosses. Negotiation is presented as a reasonable and effective solution to most problems. Bureaucrats strive to get the best possible

deal for labor power rather than attack or end the overall system of exploitation. Emphasis is placed on bargaining power within the capitalist labor market.

Strike action became a last resort to be deployed only under very limited and legally defined conditions. Wildcat strikes and varieties of worker-initiated shopfloor actions are negotiated away and prohibited within contracts. Workers who engage in such actions are open to sanction, a point the union leadership often reinforces within the membership.

While limited outbursts were permitted, leaders were obliged to police the deal and restore order in the ranks of the workers when the bosses deemed necessary. Bosses are not going to negotiate with people who can't or won't deliver what is agreed to. The bureaucracy developed centralized structures and methods of control and direction which fit its role and function. In times of mobilization the union leaders, rather than helping to overcome hesitation, view those who are mobilizing as a threat to be isolated or stopped entirely. Critically, all of this is related to structural pressures on the union leadership based on their role within capitalist relations of production rather than on personal characteristics or perspectives as the left reformists would have it.

At times bureaucrats will call on the services of left militants when a show of strength is tactically advantageous only to abandon, isolate or purge them when things have gone as far as the leadership deems necessary. This is a crucial lesson that must be kept in mind when we consider flying squads with marshals under the direction of national and local executives. Militant activists must reject the role of "left critics" of the bureaucracy, refuse the terms of the compromise with the bosses and directly challenge those who seek to enforce it. It is necessary to build a rank-and-file rebellion in the unions that actually works to break the hold of the bureaucracy.

Conclusion: Rank-And-File Autonomy

Real rank-and-file autonomy means being prepared and willing to fight independently of the bureaucracy and against it when required. As anarchists we must be upfront, open and direct about confronting the bureaucrats and conservatives within our unions. We should not put any gloss on efforts to contain rank-and-file militancy or excuse it for any reason. We must contest reformist and Leninist approaches to rank-and-file movements which would position them as conscientious pressure groups.

None of this is meant to imply that the leadership is holding back an otherwise radical membership. That is romantic silliness. Rather, the point is that developing militancy within union movements requires a clear recognition of the necessity for developing experiences of effective struggle that go beyond what the bosses or governments would permit and, at the same time, viewing honestly how the current unions leadership impedes this.

Rank-and-file movements offer a space for radicalizing workers to come together and focus our energies. When people engage in struggles, whether strikes or demonstrations against neoliberalism, we develop at least some sense of collective power, confidence and an experience of doing things differently. This can encourage an openness to more radical ideas and practices with which to address the problems we find ourselves facing. Mainstream unions, even where some resources are given to political education, are generally not going to present and develop radical alternatives. Certainly the leadership of mainstream unions cannot be expected to do so. As anarchist workers this is one area in which we can and should be active. Putting forward

radical alternatives, agitating for those alternatives and working to make them real should be part of the work we do within rank-and-file networks.

These are merely first steps in a long process of building rank-and-file opposition. They are initiatives for working class self-activity that should not be limited to being a democratic complement to the bureaucracy. We need to think beyond this to see something more in the emergence and growth of autonomous rank-and-file networks. The need to build a resistance that includes rank-and-file unionists, non-organized workers, non-status workers and migrants is critical.

The capitalist offensives of the last decade in Ontario have broken down working-class organization and resistance. Dismantling employment standards, freezing the minimum wage, eliminating rent controls and deepening cuts to social assistance for unemployed workers have made life more precarious for broadening sections of the working class.

This situation is not just a matter for deep humanitarian concern but a serious warning to the workers' movement. If the working class is reaching such a level of polarization and a section of it is experiencing such misery and privation, we are in a profoundly dangerous situation.

The working class is potentially a force for moving struggles beyond rebellion to fundamentally transform social relations and actually create society anew. This force must, however, break down many of the constraints and limitations that keep its development from realizing this anti-capitalist potential. Currently unions are largely defensive organizations geared to protect and improve workers' wages and conditions of work. They are not revolutionary, or even radical, organizations. At the same time, radical movements do emerge within existing unions.

Many workers are becoming tired of engaging in struggle only to find themselves under attack, not only by the boss, but by the officials of their own unions. The questionable actions of the OFL, especially during last year's Tory convention when the OFL organized a separate action and then left the scene when activists were attacked by police, have convinced some grassroots activists and rank-and-file workers alike of the need to make end runs around the unions officialdom and develop real alliances. Certainly this is a healthy development, one which anarchists must take seriously. This means meeting with rank-and-file workers and having serious discussions about what sort of assistance anti-capitalist movements can offer in their struggles against conservative leadership, policies and structures in their own unions.

Too often the measure of labor involvement in coalitions in Ontario has been the amount of money given to a campaign, the forcefulness of rhetoric from high profile leaders, or the winning of a motion at this or that convention. The only way that any sort of credible resistance movement is going to be forged in Ontario, however, is through a redoubling of efforts to make connections between grassroots community groups and rank-and-file workers. Indeed direct action workshops are something anarchist activists can and should offer. We should also be ready to provide picket support, help build flying squads or industrial unions among unorganized workers, as the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) have done among squeegee workers in Vancouver and involve ourselves in the creation of joint union-community anti-racism and anti-poverty working groups. Anarchist workers must play an active part in building truly rank-and-file flying squads and working groups whether we are in a union, in unorganized workplaces, or unemployed.

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