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Old Port, New Struggle

Looking back on Anarchist Solidarity for
Locked-Out Workers

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Retrieved on March 24, 2016 from web.archive.org

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2003

Contents

Lockouts: As Easy As 1-2-3 With Scabs, Courts and Injunctions	6
A Small Twist: Enter The Anarchists	7
A Radical Minority Forms During the Struggle . . .	9
The FTQ Get's Involved: Return to Negotiations . .	11
An Unsatisfactory Contract And A Dismal Future .	12

amongst whom the hope of bettering themselves socially and economically, and even joining the upper classes (for those who aren't already there!), stays present throughout their time in school. In these conditions, it's harder for them to unite with a poor Jane or Joe, who will most likely live an entire life as a 'prole'. To be fair, this wasn't the attitude of all the students involved in the struggle and some were even quite active from start to finish.

If the future is dismal for the precarious workers of the Old Port and elsewhere, the permanent solutions remain collective and in struggles. Let us hope that next time the struggle will not be to return to the same point of exploitation, but rather to defeat and ultimately eliminate the bosses.

An Unsatisfactory Contract And A Dismal Future

It is thus not a coincidence that a few days after July 1st, negotiations started again between the administration and the Old Port union. After these meetings, the executive of the union local presented an agreement with the administration to be ratified by the members. The agreement was, with only a few changes, essentially the same as the one offered before the 48-hour strike. The basic components were 3% pay raises and not much chance at getting job protection, sprinkled with smaller clauses not affecting all workers. The contract was accepted with a majority of only 62%, leaving the 38% against it greatly dissatisfied.

Truly, weeks of struggle didn't make the administration budge and the status quo was cowardly accepted by the union leadership and a majority of the membership. Many full-time employees of the Old Port, after having struggled collectively to better their working and living conditions, will now have to fall back on individual solutions such as looking for a better job elsewhere. Many students, who work at the Old Port only part-time, were happy to go back to work despite the small gains, thinking it was best to not lose their 'summer of work'. Maybe they will realize that at the end of their studies it's the same job market that awaits them, one that's clearly favorable to the bosses.

It's sad to come to the conclusion that many students didn't unite enough with their full-time co-workers for whom the dispute put into play their general living standards (wages, job security, time off, etc.). We have to admit that the capitalist ideology of success has a particularly strong effect on students,

our unions manage to negotiate good work contracts without having to go on strike or being locked-out." (Quote taken from an August 8th 2003 FTQ press release)

It was a memorable summer in Montreal's Old Port — a federally run tourist site along the St. Lawrence River that connects to the equally touristy Old Montreal. From our perspective, however, it wasn't memorable for the usual reasons that range from the exploits of a Cirque du Soleil acrobat, the most recent screening at Imax¹, or a Canada Day rock concert. Indeed, in terms of a class struggle perspective, the most memorable event this summer at the Old Port was the labor dispute between Old Port of Montreal Corporation and its 360 employees. Last May 24-25th, during a 48-hour strike called by the employees looking to put pressure on the negotiations of the recent collective agreement, the bosses decided to turn things around and lockout all of the unionized staff indefinitely.

The conflict in the Old Port thus erupted at a moment when tourist season starts in Quebec's metropolis, proving that the administrators of the federal crown corporation were ready to lose revenue on the short-term to be enriched on the long-term, and this off the backs of poorly paid workers.

The lock-out ended up being long and hard, lasting until the beginning of July. The Old Port bosses used scab labor, the courts produced injunctions against the union, the Fédération des Travailleurs-euses du Québec (FTQ)² made use of their 'goons' when it thought it was losing ground in the struggle, anarchists did solidarity actions, and an important radical minority coming from the rank and file of the union self-organized and used direct action type tactics to reach its goals. In this article, we will try to look back and analyze how these events unfolded.

¹ Imax and Le Cirque du Soleil are two corporations with operations based in the Old Port.

² The FTQ is Quebec's largest labor federation with over 500 000 members and is affiliated to the AFL-CIO.

Lockouts: As Easy As 1-2-3 With Scabs, Courts and Injunctions

It might come as a surprise that bosses would answer a 48-hour strike with a lockout. Would it have not been easier to simply absorb the 48-hour strike and return to non-conflictual negotiations later? The answer, for the bosses of the Old Port of Montreal Corporation, was no; having judged that it was necessary for their interests to hold a position of strength throughout the negotiations. The administrators made it clear to the employees that they indeed wanted to negotiate with them, however they also made it clear that they would continue to operate the tourist site with scab labor. Consequently, in proving that they weren't necessary to the functioning of the site they were able to dramatically lower the value of the unionized workers' labor.

It is obvious to state that the lockout was helped greatly by the presence of BEST private security team³, who had the double task of assuring visitors normal access to the site as well as watching over the actions of the locked-out workers. BEST Security are nothing less than scabs, meriting being called 'Worst' by whoever seeks to see working conditions improve and ultimately, wage slavery abolished.

Legally, the hiring of BEST personnel was supported by the absence of anti-scab law at the federal level in Canada. The Old Port of Montreal Corporation is a crown corporation, and thus falls under this jurisdiction. One of the demands of the locked-out workers was the establishment of a federal anti-scab law. We doubt however the exact purpose of this demand considering that problems with scabs happen in all workplace struggles regardless of legislation. It would be more useful to

³ AFPC: Alliance de la Fonction Publique Canadienne, or in English, the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC), the Old Port locals are 10333 and 1-A-333.

The FTQ Get's Involved: Return to Negotiations

The first of July, Canada Day, at a moment when direct actions against the Old Port administration were carried out almost everyday, a large solidarity demonstration was held with the intent of mobilizing other unions who are members of the FTQ (to which the AFPC in Quebec is a member). We can say, maybe because of the chosen day of the mobilization, that it was a failure. The only members of the FTQ present, besides the Old Port workers, were a dozen 'goons' from the construction union and handful of high-ranking bureaucrats such as Henri Massé. The demonstration, numbering about 400 people, was rather composed of a strong Old Port local union presence and of supporters, such as us from NEFAC.

It was a quite a vibrant demonstration, with hundreds of 'Lockout' stickers put up on site. At the end, Henri Massé, president of the FTQ, made a speech summing up the intentions of the FTQ leadership. Talking about the Old Port administration, he said "They can refuse us good working conditions and lock us out, but they can't refuse us at the negotiations table." These were the intentions of the FTQ: return to the negotiation table and end the dispute regardless of what would be offered to Old Port employees. As a matter of fact, this is part of the FTQ's general strategy, as a trade union federation that seeks to be non-confrontational with employers. As proof, they recently issued a press release praising the fact that only a small proportion of their members were presently involved in a workplace dispute. One would swear it's a boss's association press release when reading the content!⁵

⁵ There were, in August 2003, only 348 members of the FTQ in 7 different locations involved in a labor dispute announces the general secretary of the federation, René Roy. For him, it's an occasion to celebrate "This number is one of the lowest ever recorded at the FTQ in the last few years and we can congratulate ourselves. This indicates that in the current economic context,

to make the administration step back its efforts, a radical minority within the union self-organized on its own terms to plan direct actions against the interests of the Old Port bosses. Loud visits were made to administrators homes and 'night jobs' seeking to affect the infrastructure of the site were regularly undertaken, to the point that the administration accepted a return to the negotiations table so these actions would stop.

The activities of the radical minority encountered a good amount of popularity with the general union membership. For example, when calls were made to visit the administrators homes — calls that announced clearly the type of action and the inherent risk of arrest — there were still at least 50–60 unionists who answered positively. It has to be mentioned that these initiatives came at an opportune moment of the struggle, when the bosses were refusing to negotiate and that picketing of the site was becoming more and more inefficient. If these conditions favored strong participation by the rank-and-file, they also had an influence on the union leadership (all the way up to the high levels of the FTQ) who, seeing its role at the negotiations table disappearing, was now ready to permit its members to “do everything it takes” to force the Old Port bosses to return to normal communications.

We can clearly note with this example that in times of crisis during a struggle involving a 'mainstream' union, there is space and possibilities for an organized force from the rank-and-file to take a certain control over the direction of the struggle — and this despite the official union structures that tend more often to smother rank-and-file initiatives to the benefit of a more hierarchal approach. What's worrisome however is the recuperation that union leadership could make of the rank-and-file initiatives. They may want to sometimes present a facade of 'radicalism', but they certainly won't look for radical solutions to win a dispute.

publically denounce FTQ locals who scabbed other unions in the past (Vidéotron dispute, etc.) and to question their place in the labor movement. Also, we think the necessary strength to stop scabbing will come directly from the point of conflict, as well as in the building of the movement's generalized power against the boss class, and not from legislation that is beyond the control of workers.

In addition to the presence of scabs, there was also a series of court injunctions that reduced the efficiency of picketing, the most important ones being the limit to six picketers per entry and the impossibility for locked-out workers to enter any part of the Old Port site. When the dispute started, picket lines had 40–50 people holding them. With the injunctions, picketers were demobilized. For a few days, the injunctions were challenged by the locked-out employees but they suffered the consequences of their stance and ended up facing police interventions and heavy fines.

In these conditions, we can judge that the Old Port of Montreal Corporation was able to lockout its employees without losing large sums of revenue. Obviously, attendance on the site was down during the first few days of the dispute. This quickly changed and it was back to normal, with thousands of visitors gathering in the Old Port everyday, often without even knowing there was a labor dispute going on.

A Small Twist: Enter The Anarchists

Actually, the anarchists involved in supporting the locked-out workers were us: Groupe Anarchiste Bête Noire, the local NE-FAC member group in Montreal, plus a few anti-authoritarian supporters from other political groups in Montreal. For a few months we had taken up the habit of doing solidarity work during strikes. Our 'actions' can be as ordinary as chatting with striking workers on the picket line. In the case of the Old

Port struggle however, a tactical path became evident very fast, which consisted in defying the court injunctions. As the injunctions didn't apply to us, because none of us were members of the union, making life difficult for the scabs and breaking the touristy atmosphere of the Old Port was made easy. All of our objectives could be met with one action. It was to cross the security line and distribute union pamphlets on site.

Before doing this, we spoke about our plan to union workers who were the most involved on the picket line and had our call to action approved by the union local's president. For many weeks, we did public mobilizations for 'Solidarity Pickets.' Every Sunday, a group of about fifteen of us would leaflet the site to make the lockout known to visitors. Many of the people we spoke to were sympathetic to the workers and sometimes decided to not spend their money in the business's that were operating during the lockout.

BEST Security was less greeting. Many times, we were physically intimidated, filmed, pushed-around, kicked-out... but it must be noted that we also filmed them, pushed them around, etc. War is war! Especially when it's on the terrain of class. The number of security agents increased on Sunday from week to week, as a preventive measure against us. We can affirm that our actions had an economic impact on the conflict, as they forced la Société du Vieux-Port to spend important sums of money that weren't budgeted or planned.

All of this created something of a relationship between us and the Old Port unionists. They expected to see us every Sunday, and for many it was a first contact with anarchists in action. Initiatives like those of our group, in terms of labor solidarity, are not new. There was however an absence in this type of action for roughly twenty years in the province of Quebec. Looking back to the past, it was mostly Marxist-Leninist groups in the 1970's and '80's who were the last so-called revolutionaries to be involved in workplace struggles. We think that our approach is different and better than what there was.

While these old Marxist-Leninists didn't see the potential of autonomous and self-managed working class movements and, for them, it was best to subordinate the movements into the advancement of the party; contrary to this, we anarchists think that the strength of our class resides in its capacity to lead its own fights, within its own mass organizations (unions, community groups, etc.), without a vanguard party being imposed on them. Simply put, the Marxist-Leninists were involved in struggles to help their parties grow, we are in struggles to help the struggles grow!

In that sense, one of the secondary goals of our involvement in the Old Port dispute was to popularize the idea of inter-union solidarity and solidarity between non-unionized and unionized workers. We think that it would be beneficial to have a network of fighting workers that could avoid the obstacles set up by union bureaucracy. That way, workers could get involved in common struggles, despite different union affiliations. This does not contradict activity and organizing within the existing unions. Rather, the idea is to strengthen the rank-and-file and to make counter-act the bureaucracy of the labor federations. A few locked-out workers from the Old Port gave their names to be on a 'Solidarity Picket' list and eventually become part of this network.

A Radical Minority Forms During the Struggle

As a matter of fact, in terms of rank-and-file activity and organization, members of the local AFPC⁴ Old Port union provided good examples of it during the dispute. When it had become clear that symbolic picketing of the Old Port wasn't sufficient

⁴ AFPC: Alliance de la Fonction Publique Canadienne, or in English, the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC), the Old Port locals are 10333 and 1-A-333.