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APARNA SUNDAR AND KYOKO SATO

TA'S WALK THE LINE:

Two Perspectives

Aparna Sundar: Being from India, walking a picket line in a Canadian January is probably one of the hardest things I've ever done physically, and the monotony of walking in circles hour after hour was no intellectual compensation. But there were other compensations, as hardship opened up other sides of us - forcing us out of our cliques and talking to each other, reducing our inhibitions about talking to strangers, and bringing out reserves of mutual concern and solidarity that are usually buried deep under the competition and alienation of graduate student life.

I consider myself quite politicized, and have done organising and research work for the labour movement in India. But this is the first time I have been on strike as a worker myself, and it really sharpened my awareness of the acute inequalities of power within this system. There was hope and courage to be derived from small victories - the supportive retreats of drivers on a car picket, a traffic hold-up on St. George Street, the militant occupation of Hart House with the President of the University and other bigwigs inside, the letter from Margaret Attwood condemning the administration.

But the speed with which the administration talked about bringing in scabs or restructuring away our jobs, as if what we did was of little consequence one way or the other, and the apparently only-too-willing acquiescence to this by the departments, showed how little power we had, what few means we had at our disposal to press our demands. This sense of having to make a difficult case was reinforced in interactions with the wider public in today's neo-liberal climate of little sympathy for waged workers or for the importance of public education.

Dealing with the administration and the wider public also highlighted the gulf between, on the one hand, the pride and commitment we bring to our work and, on the other, its devaluation by the employers. We were angry at being portrayed as spoilt and irresponsible when most of us had put in many more hours than we were paid for in order to do a good job, and we continued to feel concerned and responsible about our students, not wanting them to fall behind or lose out.

Now that the strike has been settled and a deal signed, I am left a little unsure as to what lessons to take from it. We had understood that we had been holding out for some concession on tuition, some recognition of the principle of an affordable education, and yet we settled for little more than what we had been offered before the strike - a slight wage increase and an agreement to have a union representative on a task force to look into graduate student funding. I do feel disappointed with the leadership, especially for trying to sell this to us as a "victory".

But to see our defeat, as many do, as being due to the leadership "selling us out" is too easy. It is to the credit of the leadership that a membership such as ours had been mobilised enough to go out on strike in

the first place. Far from being radical, students at the University of Toronto are by and large apolitical. The bases of unity for our members are relatively few. Each member has a unique financial package, many do well out of cozy relationships with faculty, many see their teaching assistantships as a temporary hardship, a stepping stone toward a well-paid professorship, many subscribe to the ruling neo-liberal ideology. The services we provide are not seen as "essential" in the same sense as those provided by maintenance workers, for instance, and none of these other relatively more powerful unions came out at the same time as us. So we were "structurally weak", and perhaps the leadership was afraid that if the administration went ahead with its threat to fire us, our membership would not be prepared for a heightened conflict. I can't say whether the outcome of this strike has radicalised the membership, or diminished their faith in political action.

For me, the one lesson that the strike has reinforced is that a lot more organising work needs to be done over a much longer period if we want a membership that will not let itself be "sold out".

Kyoko Sato: My experience of the strike was frustrating but at the same time valuable. The strike gave me an opportunity to learn hands-on the way labour disputes work. I learned how people react to a situation depending on their interests. I also saw how issues larger than the immediate concerns of the strikers--such as wage increases and improved benefits--came into play. I became emotionally involved in the strike as matters such as the corporatization of universities, the quality of education for undergraduate and graduate students, and various power relations within the university came to the foreground.

Because I was a member of both the Graduate Assistant (GA) union at OISE/UT and the Teaching Assistant (TA) union at the University of Toronto, I had an opportunity to see the differences in their stakes and how they work as unions. The GA union has a much smaller constituency than the TA union, and the former seemed to have a stronger sense of solidarity within and with other unions than the latter. Also, for the GA union, the stakes in terms of money and principle seemed higher than for the TA union.

The fact that I was a course instructor made my experience all the more interesting. For one thing, there were not many people who were in the same situation as I was, and, therefore, a lot of the discussions of the TA union did not directly address the kinds of concerns that were unique to some of us. For instance, my course was constantly under the threat of being canceled due to the strike, but I did not feel that the union was very helpful on this matter. I really had to make a case for and make an effort to preserve the course with the help of the department chair (what an irony!). It was a chilling reality that many courses that were supposed to be taught by the union members were indeed canceled. Because of circumstances like these, I often felt rather alone in the battle. I remember worrying every day and night about the fate of my course and my students. I was especially outraged when management came up with a proposal to "restructure" our courses.

I was glad that the strike came to an end before the deadline for the official "restructuring," but I must say that I am left with bitter feelings. The strike had a large impact on me in terms of working morale: it was very difficult to regain the same degree of commitment to teaching and being a collegial member of the department in which I work.

The emergence of the restructuring plan showed me that the university administrators do not care about the quality of post-secondary education; it also showed me that this view seems to be reflected in the attitudes of some undergraduate students. Also, some staff members in the department in which I teach did not seem to understand what the strike was all about. They saw the strike as a mere disruption to the academic lives of undergraduate students--and the strikers as the source of the problem. I understood their concerns, but the difference in our understanding of the issues around the strike created a situation of distrust. This has not been the most motivating environment for me to work as an instructor.

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