

Onitsha? It's Always Like this in Onitsha: 3903 and the 'big Other'¹

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Introduction

Mid-way through our recent struggles a member of 3903 sent an email across a departmental list-serve pleading for people to come to their senses and bring the strike to an end, and in so doing admonished people for getting-off “on this labour action stuff.” There were people who called this statement belittling, while another asserted that it needed to be acknowledged that there were in fact people who got off on striking. Rather than so quickly dismiss the possibility that “getting off” on political action is productive it is worthwhile considering in what way, in the context of the recent strike, “enjoyment is a political factor.”

Recognizing enjoyment in its political dimensions is, of course, the basis of the work of Slavoj Žižek. Rather than seeing it as an

¹ A much longer version of this paper is forthcoming in a book about the 2008-09 CUPE 3903 strike, entitled *Be Realistic: Demand the Impossible; Redefine the Possible* (Kersplebedeb publishers)

impediment to effective politics, as an obstacle to making rational decisions, he attempts to understand it in both its productive and destructive capacities – capacities that are not as contradictory as they may seem.

For Žižek, the ethics of the political culminate in “enjoying one’s symptom.” At one point he evokes an episode from Ryszard Kapuściński’s *The Shadow of the Sun*² as an example of this logic. Driving to Onitsha, Nigeria to visit its market, Kapuściński encounters a traffic jam that stays his progress. Stepping out of his car to follow the line of cars that waits ahead of him Kapuściński finds the source of the problem: a gaping hole has opened in the road. The only way to continue is to wait to have someone drag each vehicle down into, and then up out of, the muddy crater. Along with the hole, however, he finds a bustle of activity: newly painted hotel signs, vendors and people gathered to simply socialize. Žižek writes that “the hole had become an institution. ...a ridiculous contingent and meaningless obstacle triggered a swarm of social activity; people started to *enjoy their symptom*” (Žižek, 2002, 254).

It’s not hard to see parallels in the recent strike: around the gap that separated us from the administration (and ourselves) arose a social and administrative institution: a new office with new ‘staff’ (i.e. rank-and-file members); food and coffee service; pick-up and tear down crews; frequent internal and external communications; radio-banter (who stole the cookies?); collections of media-vans at the main gate; the *York is Us* collective and the Unit 2 communications group; musicians, actors and a mime that traveled from line to line; the writing and performing of two short plays about the strike; frequent and well attended General Membership- and steward’s council-meetings; members of the community delivering doughnuts and stopping to talk (or, it must be admitted, threatening us with knives, bottles and cars); and last but not least, the creation of new friendships and the continued presence, post-

² Inevitably the question of the validity of Žižek’s method and his examples arises in these instances: not only is this episode mis-referenced by Žižek (the wrong page number is given) he sometimes gets details wrong. In this case it is a minor detail: the hole is not on a main street, as Žižek claims, but “on the only road into town from this direction...” according to Kapuściński (2001, 302). Kapuściński, it should be noted, is himself criticized for being inaccurate on major details (see for instance Ryle, 2001/07). While the question of Žižek’s examples is worth taking up, there is no space for it here where the logic the example is supposed to embody is of greater interest.

strike, of red felt-squares on the coats and bags of strikers that identify people as members of a political community.

For Žižek the centre of social being is a gap or antagonism that constitutes the social as such, and he links it to the Marxist conception of class struggle. The significance that Žižek attributes to this is not, however, simply that a social organization arises around a fault line. The importance of this recognition lies in the possibility of instigating social change, and stems from the distinction Lacan makes between his concept of the symptom and Freud's: for Freud the symptom was something to be interpreted, something that pointed to a cause. A similar conception appears in Lacan's earlier thinking, in which he theorized symptoms as coded messages directed at the Other. Later in his work, however, the symptom became the location of an uninterpretable enjoyment that did not need to be dissolved: it was not the symptom that needed to change, but one's approach to it (on this see Miller, 2007). That which was perceived as a blockage needs to instead be transformed into a solution. That is, rather than filling the hole only to find it open somewhere else, the productive capacity that it presents needs to be harnessed.

Similarly, the strike could be taken as a symptom to be interpreted as the result of the vocationalization and neo-liberalization of the university, the result of the economic structure that belies this transformation. Accordingly, the political-economic conditions leading to the strike are discussed below. In addition, however, it is also possible to see it as a symptom to be enjoyed: what for many was a blockage to getting back to class, the result of President Shoukri's assertion that he 'doesn't do labour relations' or the union's obstinacy, could also be transformed into a solution for some of the ills suffered by the students and workers of York. But before approaching the question of the (or what *were* the) productive potentials of the neo-liberal university's 'symptom' and the enjoyment taken in it, one must make an account of some of the divisions within the union and their relation to the conditions that led to 85 days on the line.

The fundamental premise here is the following: it is the belief in and libidinal attachment to an organization or person that is seen to guarantee the smooth functioning of political and economic life – a.k.a. the “big Other” – that maintains political and economic structures as they stand. In this way “enjoyment/*jouissance*” is to be understood as

both 'pleasure' in the Freudian sense of not-displeasure and the legal sense of 'enjoying' (have access to and/or use of) property. In the case of 3903 this takes the form of assuming that the university administration and provincial government are those who can and should effectively maintain and transform York. This is mirrored in the practice of having the union's bargaining team (BT) act as a representative of one's demands to that Other, asking that it meet certain needs. By contrast, it is only in giving up on these two 'Others' (the University admin and the BT) that systemic change can effectively take root. Taking the logic of direct-democracy and self-organization to its limit, "enjoyment" is to be taken in both the sense of the intense displeasure (which is also an extreme pleasure) of giving up on the guarantees provided by these two "big Others" and embracing one's investment and direct engagement in union processes, and ultimately the organization of the university. In this sense it is one's own activity and not that of the 'Other' that takes the place of 'guarantees,' without itself becoming a guarantee.

From roadblock to positive condition

To approach how the psychoanalytic notion of the symptom can be used at the level of the social and of our local in particular, it's instructive to first turn to an example Žižek continually uses and which repeats the logic alluded to above: Adorno's solution to the oscillation, in the social sciences, between a conception of society as a collection of individual agents versus an organic whole was not to conceive of them as an irreconcilable antinomy. Instead, he saw their irreconcilability as the *definition* of society: "what first appeared as our inability to understand what society really is turns out to be the fundamental feature of social reality itself" (Žižek, 2005, 333). This is to say that the solution to the deadlock is to read the essence of modern society as the antagonism between the social and the individual.

The symptom is, of course, that which is produced by antagonism. Before describing that symptom in the present case, Adorno's comments can be used to help formulate a definition of local 3903.³

³ It should be noted that the reference to Adorno is another of Žižek's 'examples' and not what he holds to be the central antagonism of life under capitalism. In short, what Žižek holds to be the core antagonism of capitalism is based on Marx's description of the commodity form and leads Žižek to class struggle.

One of the central antagonisms (for there are many antagonisms) within the local was condensed around a motion passed at a General Membership Meeting (GMM) on November 20, 2008: “*BIRT that the General membership send the BT [bargaining team] back to the table, and that the BT be allowed the flexibility to bargain at their discretion*” (November 20, 2008 minutes, pages 12, 14). For some members the motion meant the bargaining team could do whatever they thought was best, and any motion that attempted to give them any sort of concrete direction was seen as a contravention of that discretion. For others it meant that the BT had flexibility to negotiate within the limits of the priorities that were set at the November 5 GMM, and any significant alteration of those demands required the permission or direction of the membership through the democratic mechanisms of GMMs – an institution taken to be the ‘highest decision-making body of the union.’

These were not, of course, mere interpretations: they were backed by action that led to incredible tension within the ranks of 3903 over its role as an organization: was it to function as a representational body where a small group of people (the bargaining team) made decisions on behalf of the rest, or was it to function as a direct democracy? This tension is far from new, however. It has existed since CUPE’s inception: the Canadian Union of Public Employees began with the coming together of the National Union of Public Service Employees (NUPSE) and the National Union of Public Employees (NUPE), each of which had different histories and approaches to unionism. NUPSE, at the time leading up to the merger of the two unions, was largely dominated by the Ontario Hydro Employees Union, which for a long period had been an employer-organized professional association and was as a consequence biased towards “rational cooperation with management” and focused on that local’s particular struggles (Ross, 2005, 193). NUPE, by contrast, leaned away from professionalization and toward workers’ self-sufficiency in terms of each local’s organizational and bargaining structures. It was also more inclined toward working for broader solidarity between different unions and different types of workers. The merger of these two national bodies did not dissolve this duality. 3903’s internal struggles and its relationship to the National organization are testament to this.

These two models – business unionism and social-unionism – are in practice not exclusive within CUPE as provincial, national or local

bodies. In a recent paper Ross outlines some of the differences that exist within “social-unions” (unions that at least nominally assert their support of wider issues of social justice and worker solidarity), demonstrating that many operate as a mixture of the above organizational forms, a mixture that has a long history in Canada’s labour movement as a whole (Ross, 2007, 22-3). So, when members of 3903 called for us all to ‘just get along’ in the face of these debates that we might achieve our common goals, the question that needs to be asked is *why* we aren’t simply getting along and how our common goals are shaped by the way we organize ourselves. And as many pointed out, it is not a simple matter of asserting differences between ‘us’ and ‘them.’ Instead of framing the nature of 3903 in the question of it being *either* a representational democracy *or* a direct democracy, the answer is that 3903 *is* the constant tension between these two forms of democracy.

This is not to say that this tension always plays out the same way. Ross notes that in some unions that consider themselves of the social-unionism variety, “...social unionism is what happens ‘outside of bargaining’ and is counterposed to – or at least separate from – what remains the core of union activity: collective bargaining and the labour-management relationship” (Ross, 2007, 22). To this should be added that, in some unions, models of direct democracy are upheld outside of bargaining while representational democracy is adopted during bargaining. Turning to the GMMs that occurred shortly before bargaining began and comparing them to those during the bargaining process it is possible to see this shift: in several meetings before bargaining began the BT brought proposals to the membership, the membership discussed them, made changes and suggested new proposals to then vote on whether or not to include those proposals and alterations.⁴ By contrast, during the bargaining that happened after the strike began the membership gave immediate, binding direction to the BT in very few instances, and in vague terms: once on November 5 (the GMM that officially set the strike in motion), by passing a motion that endorsed a set of priorities prepared by the bargaining team⁵; on November 15 when a framework that attempted to substantialize those

⁴ For example, see meeting minutes for 29 May, 12 June, 25 June, 7 July, 2008.

⁵ “BIRT to endorse the priorities listen in the document ‘Bargaining Priorities November 5th 2008’” (November 5, 2008 minutes, page 17). This motion passed.

priorities as demands was not accepted⁶; and finally after back-to-work legislation was passed by Dalton McGuinty's Liberal Party at a meeting held in a United Church on Bloor Street, where a motion was passed regarding our health plan.⁷

There were, of course, several instances when members put forward motions to give the BT substantial direction, but these were either voted down or phrased as 'strong recommendations' that were not binding.⁸ This has not always been the case. In a short piece about the 3903 strike of 2000-2001 Clarice Kuhling notes that debates over whether or not the membership should give the bargaining team binding direction occurred (as they did during the recent strike) but motions were passed that did just that. During one meeting

...a motion was overwhelmingly passed committing the bargaining team to specific language on tuition protection.... At yet another GMM the bargaining team was instructed not to accept any wage package for the newly organized graduate assistants below what was presently proposed (2002, 79).

Whereas during the strike in 2000 direct intervention by the membership in the bargaining process occurred, no such intervention happened during the strike of 2008-09, signalling a shift in how the tensions between direct- and representational-democracy unfolded within the local. This is a shift from a membership looking to make decisions collectively to one that relies on another group to do the deciding. That is, it shows a shift from an engaged membership to one that relies on a 'big Other' in the form of a representational body (a concept discussed more below).

⁶ "BIRT that we approve the BT's tentative framework and give them a mandate to proceed" (November 15, 2008 minutes, page 15). This motion failed to pass.

⁷ At the time of writing, minutes for this meeting were unavailable.

⁸ For example, see the minutes for the 21 January, 2009 GMM where a long motion that would have given the bargaining team explicit direction was not passed. At one February meeting there examples of 'strong recommendations,' but minutes for this meeting were not available during the writing of this paper.

From symptom...

Another related tension exists within CUPE 3903 – and unionized public employees in general – because of the type of work these employees do and that work’s position within society. As educational workers we exist as part of the ‘greater good’ that the state claims to maintain and must, as workers, not only struggle over how we are treated by the university as our employer but also the definition of that ‘greater good.’ In her history of CUPE Ross describes, for instance, the contradiction for working-class public employees between the widespread ideology that creating public-works was for the common good and being given an uneven share of the development of that infrastructure. As Ross puts it, this contradiction was “embodied by municipal workers themselves” (Ross, 2005, 114-119). She offers that

...the contradictions of unimpeded urban growth were experienced by municipal workers themselves and made their political alignments unstable. As municipal workers themselves they ‘produced city life’ and thus had an interest in sustaining growth and expansion. However, as members of the working class, they also had to live in the elite-defined and decidedly inegalitarian urban space they helped create. In other words, there was a growing conflict between “boosterism” [i.e. the doctrine of lauding/pushing for publicly-owned and operated utilities by capitalists because it would help business and the community] and social welfare... (119).

Similarly, as education workers, members of 3903 struggle with the tension between providing quality education to their students, getting it for themselves as graduate students (in the case of two thirds of the local’s membership), encountering systemic barriers to doing this and, finally, struggling with the need to disrupt that education while fighting for its betterment.

Ross’s reference to “boosterism” and the instability of political alignments is perhaps not so far from our own situation as it may first appear. The similarity can be seen by taking a brief look at the changing organization of the university. Fisher and Rubenson (1998) argue that since the 1980s there has been a shift in Canadian universities away from the tradition of a liberal, thought-for-thought’s-sake, education and ever

closer towards vocationalism. In the latter conception the university is seen by the state and university administrators as an institution that should aim for “full cost recovery” and the provision of skills that are needed for our capitalist economy. This is increasingly true at York: whereas in the late fifties and early sixties York was created with the explicit mandate to aid in the betterment of society, under the reign of Lorna Marsden, it explicitly became corporate in its intentions. David Noble – a vocal York professor and activist who Marsden and her administration attempted to silence – describes the shift that has increasingly made York “an employee training centre and research job shop for private industry” (Noble, 2005): in the 1990s patent and Intellectual Property law changed such that ownership was no longer held by the crown but by universities; the senate was disempowered in the face of the increased strength of a corporately dominated Board of Governors; and there is an increasing level of private investment in university programs and infrastructure. All these factors have had corporatizing effects on our university.

Noble sees the “Technology Enhanced Learning” (TEL) building on York’s campus as the ‘symptom’ of this trend: the product of government investment, one of its floors was leased out to corporate industry and private firms were solicited to shape curricula to suit their own needs. Further, Noble relates the arguments made by Marsden in a governmental/legal document written to prevent him from seeing the proposals used to garner the funds for the building’s creation, seeing them as a direct statement of the new corporate interests of the university:

“York objects to the release of the documents,” Marsden wrote, because “all documents contain commercial information” such as “enrollment plans in connection with the new SuperBuild buildings” and “details that relate to the delivery of specific technology and business courses.” “We object to this information being disclosed as it could thereby well become available to [other universities and businesses] and do considerable damage to our competitive position.” According to York’s third-party objection, any information regarding student enrollment, which is the chief criterion for government funding, and course offerings, the educational grounds for charitable

status, have now been deemed “commercial” and, hence, confidential, in the interest of competitive advantage (Noble, 2005).

The experienced head of three large corporations helped transform the university into her fourth, and an institution created to better the public good does so *via* capitalist-style production rather than liberal education – ‘boosterism’ thus may not be so long past as we might think. This does not explain the shift in political organization that was seen within the local, however, as many of the changes that were made to 3903’s structure around ‘bargaining from below’ were done precisely at the time that Marsden was accomplishing this work. The shift can be better understood with reference to internal politics and how these led to the bargaining team holding political sway or hegemony over the membership.

...To its enjoyment

Before discussing that problem, however, it is worthwhile continuing with the question of the nature of the university. Newstadt (2008, unpaginated) is right when he concludes his piece on the York strike with the comment that the underfunding of graduate studies, the poverty-wages paid to graduate students and the creation of ever-more precarious employment for non-tenured faculty – the products of the neo-liberal university which lead to the precipitation of the recent strike – are not things “that a single round of bargaining can hope to fully address and redress.” So too is Scott McLean, assistant news editor of York’s student paper *The Excalibur*, when he writes that “the union has its head in the clouds if it thinks it is going to negotiate an end to the ‘casualization of labour’” (McLean, 2009, 8). The problem, however, is that they are right for the wrong reasons. Newstadt suggests that there is perhaps potential for such a transformation in the upcoming sector-wide bargaining that CUPE is attempting to co-ordinate for 2010, while McLean suggests that we can hope President Shoukri will come to see the light and “level the playing field.” While the latter position ignores the neo-liberal agenda that stands as the uneven-playing field that no university president could (or would be hired to) ‘level,’ the former perhaps forgets that even the most liberal of arts and science institutions still presuppose the state and economy in which they are embedded and

cannot stand as a ‘neutral’ ivory tower in their midst. As Žižek might put it, the Hegelian ‘beautiful soul’ might think it contemplates and criticizes from afar but is fully complicit in the system in which it finds itself. Thinking in these terms expressed by Newstadt and McLean leaves us squarely within the logic of the liberal-democratic capitalist economy in which we stand.

One of the great ironies of the shift to the ‘professionalized’ university is the budget put forward by Stephen Harper’s Federal Conservatives at around the time of 3903’s strike, one that includes the transformation of Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) grants into a means of creating wealth for private interests: what was originally devised by Harold Innis as a means of staving off the militarization of the university was to become the means of further transforming the university into a state-mediated capital venture. This should remind us not only that the provincial conservative government of Mike Harris wasn’t the first to ‘attack’ education, but that in Canada the university *is a part of the state*, and that we perhaps put too much stock in the idea of a liberal arts university composed of tenured faculty who are “free” to speak their minds. As Newstadt points out, in the fifties and sixties the university system was one largely reserved for elites (read: it was classist – among other things) and it was only in the mid-to-late sixties that it was opened up to a larger section of the population – hence the existence of York. Even with this shift, however, the ‘liberal arts university’ is an ideological fantasy couched in terms of (scientific, artistic, philosophical...) knowledge for knowledge’s sake, which falls well within liberal notions of property and individualism. In a university context this translates into *certain* knowledges being allowed to exist for their own sake, into a systemic imbalance in what is allowed to be contemplated and investigated. This is all to say that to fully move beyond the neo-liberal university one need not fall back on old conceptions of it, not only make small gains within its current form, but also assert that *another* world is possible.

The failure to undertake such a project is seen in the second big Other that can be identified in the context of the strike: the union’s bargaining team. To grasp to what extent this was so, it’s instructive to look at the attitude of (some of) the BT members about the nature of the bargaining process:

The BT has thrown around the following analogy which I think is worthwhile expressing here:

You want to sell a car and luck has there is only one buyer.

The buyer, however, is perfectly well aware of what that car has sold for before.

He knows what similar cars sell for today (I'm just going to use the masculine here).

But, he also knows that his seller is pretty wily and will not take the average amount but probably a percent or two higher.

He estimates that the cost of the car is, say, \$10,000 factoring in both the average costs and the historical costs that this car has sold for.

The buyer also knows that he is willing to go a bit farther on that 10K to seal a deal. A few hundred dollars more, maybe even a thousand (3903 listserv communication, November 16, 2008).

This comparison goes on for some length, but what is important is less the explicit intention of this comparison than what it reveals about the role the bargaining team came to play within the context of the strike: first, the Canadian and American auto-sectors – an important part of the Ontario economy – have recently fallen into dire straits because of the financial crisis. If York's administration is to be believed (they keep their books closed to the public), this is also true of the university, and was used as an opportunity to assure everyone (union members and the public alike) that it was the union that was at fault for the whole strike-ordeal by asking for too much. Secondly, it compares the labour of teaching-assistants, research-assistants and contract faculty to a commodity, which all Marxists know is (and is not) the case with waged labour. Lastly, and most importantly for the argument presented here, *it assumes that the university and the union are talking about the same thing*. Where public employees are explicitly responsible for public wealth – in this instance, public education – they are in a unique position to question the nature of that wealth. An alternative metaphor could be put this way: the university wants to sell you a used car with a broken radio, and you want an accessible, fully functioning public transit system. What the above

shows is an implicit deference to terms set by the existing social arrangement – i.e. the big Other.

That some of the members of the bargaining team held this view, however, is not the most important element of this encounter with the big Other: if members of the local had given the bargaining team binding directions, the individual approaches of each of the BT's members would be of less interest. The problem is that it was coupled with assertions by union members that “faith” should be put in members of the BT because they had been elected.²⁹ While this term in itself does not necessarily indicate a belief in the big Other, it does when considering that it was used *as an argument against giving members more power to decide what the bargaining team could or should do*. It was not the case, as has been suggested, that the membership of 3903 decided to increase the division of labour between itself and the bargaining team so their energies could be better spent on different forms of engagement: the arguments given in favour of this “division of labour” most often revolved around letting the bargaining team “do its job” as a means to bring the strike to a quick end, and any attempt to “prevent” this work was labelled the chicanery of “strike-happy” radicals. Even if this logic had been put forward, giving binding direction does not undo the division of labour between, say, the executive, the membership, the union's various committees and the BT: as noted above, they would still be the ones to enter the bargaining room to engage with the employer, vote on bargaining decisions, and in the end (along with the executive) sign off on any deals. It would have merely demanded more engagement (and yes, time) from the membership, and given them more power in the course of negotiations.

In addition, it was the case that several of the bargaining team members were *not* elected, but acclaimed, further pointing to a “faith” in the Other rather than political engagement and a decision to employ energies elsewhere. That is, it is clear that the people making these arguments had not in fact voted for the members sitting on the bargaining team (as they didn't know that several had not been voted for at all) but put their trust in representational democracy *per se*. Further, there is little evidence that energy was thereafter spent in alternative ways: the only form this took were the several “days of action” where activities other than picketing were organized... but *not*, it is worth noting, by people who had openly argued for the autonomy of the

bargaining team at general membership meetings. In effect, the coupling of a bargaining team that accepted the social terms of bargaining with a membership willing to let the bargaining team do as it would put the local squarely in a business-unionism style of organizing and in the grips of the big Other.

It is useful at this point to note a comparison with another representative body in the local that was made up of both elected and acclaimed members: the executive. On several occasions it was claimed by members of this body that as representatives of the membership they were duty-bound to include themselves in certain bargaining decisions. For example, towards the end of the strike this argument was made by executive members in regards to the question of accepting binding arbitration or braving the potential of (rather, the *threat* of) back-to-work legislation. The difference between this reference to representation and that applied to the bargaining team is at least two-fold. First, in the local's constitution the executive is formalized as the representative of the membership *only outside of general meetings*,⁹ meetings which are considered the highest decision making body of the local.¹⁰ As per the discussion above, in practice this standard was not equally applied to the bargaining team. This leads to the second difference: at no point was it argued that the executive should be trusted to do its job and left to its own devices. Indeed, when one executive member made the unilateral decision to forgo mounting a legal challenge to the back-to-work legislation that eventually did get passed, they were criticized for making an important decision without bringing it to the general membership for discussion. That is, in practice the membership of the local did not allow the executive to perform its part of the 'division of power,' ultimately treating it much differently than the bargaining team.

This can largely be explained by the political climate created by events that happened pre-strike. Attempts to question the role of 3903's own professional staff's decision making processes led to a grievance against members of the executive. The way this grievance was (mis)handled resulted in over half of the executive resigning prior to the

⁹ See article 9(c) of 3903's Constitution and Bylaws, as amended in 2003: "The executive committee shall be the governing body of the local between membership meetings."

¹⁰ "It is widely understood that the membership, as present at the AGM and GMMs, is the highest decision-making body of CUPE 3903" (3903 policy manual, 2005, 4). A motion reaffirming this was passed midway through the strike.

strike. This meant that the local was left without, among other people, a chair, treasurer, communications officer, and two of three chief stewards. Significantly, some of those expelled had had experience in the strike of 2000-01 – experience that would have been highly valuable. These positions were soon filled, but this meant that people had to step into roles during a period that demanded a great deal of knowledge and experience with little chance to acclimatize themselves. The new communications officer, for instance, had no prior experience; and while a communications committee was formed at the beginning of the strike its core contributors resigned after just over a month, in large part because of the bargaining team's refusal to share bargaining information.¹¹ Added to this was the fact that only one of the two members of the executive who were also on the BT regularly attended executive meetings. Further, the executive included racialized members – one of whom was shouted down at a GMM, and another who was uncomfortable presenting themselves in front of the general membership because of concerns about racism. All of these factors contributed to a general de-legitimization of the executive and a fragmentation of any cohesiveness it may have had. Coupled with the BT's refusal to share bargaining information and strategy, General Membership Meetings were transformed into information gathering sessions rather than spaces for decision making.

This is where the difference between interpreting the symptom and enjoying it becomes important. The strike can clearly be understood ('interpreted') as the result ('symptom') of the wider systemic problems of a capitalist economy reaching its not-so-invisible (nor autonomous) hand into Ontario's universities and transforming them in the image of neo-liberalism. To understand how this contrasts with 'enjoying your symptom,' there are three things that need to be noted: First, the psychoanalytic patient's ability to recite the cause of their symptom is not enough to rid them of it (Freud, 1914). Second, the end of analysis hasn't arrived until one no longer acts under the supposition that there is a subject – the 'big Other' – who can fulfill one's desire (Lacan, 1981). Lastly, both of these steps are necessary. To relate this back to CUPE 3903, finding the root causes of the strike (neo-liberalization) and understanding the conditions in which the struggles take place (the bargaining process, for example) are not enough so long as you assume

¹¹ See the resignation letter included in the executive minutes of December 18, 2008.

there is someone else who can fulfill your demands. That is, implying that the best way to challenge the continued neo-liberalization of the university sector is to sit at the bargaining table¹² does not go far enough.

This mode of thinking is present even at the level of sector-wide bargaining. As Dan Crow (member of CUPE's Ontario University Workers Co-ordinating Committee) notes, the attempt to co-ordinate bargaining in Ontario's university sector in 2010 aims at pushing "the provincial government to address underfunding and the lack of pensions and benefits for large numbers of university workers" (2008, unpaginated). While he sees this as a step towards imagining "what a university might be in a post-neoliberal social order," it clearly relies on the 'big Other' to fulfill these demands: a province that will put more money into the sector and administrators who will put this money to use. This is not to say that bargaining (or striking) should be completely left behind – far from it. But there is a reflexive turn that can be taken to transform the bargaining process from a purely reformist struggle bound to the limits of existing structures to one that invents new forms of social organization.

While this was not apparent in most of the media coverage of the strike – which primarily focused on the fact that part of the union's demands were for higher wages – it quickly became apparent for those involved that the central issue for members of 3903 was pushing back the transformation of faculty into an inexpensive (i.e. grossly underpaid and overworked) temporary workforce. That is, one demand was clearly privileged over others in internal discussions on the strike. This is significant when considering Žižek's conceptions of ideology and capitalism. In distinction to Althusser (an important Marxist-Lacanian antecedent), who locates ideology at the level of the state and its extensions, Žižek locates ideology at the level of the economy – the commodity form. The fact that we all act as if money did possess inherent value, as if commodities were magical entities, belies all other

¹² Or in the law courts, in the case of being legislated back to work by Dalton McGuinty's Liberals. It was suggested that 3903 fight the legislation in court as had nurses in B.C. in 2001. This route was not taken because legal counsel thought this tactic would be unsuccessful. It may have been unsuccessful in more ways than originally thought: Larry Savage (2008), in his comments on the increasing use of rights discourse in labour struggles, points out that the shift towards rights discourse and the law take emphasis away from labour's real source of power – organization.

ideological formations under capitalism. Hence Žižek's assertion that the relations of production are the "most fundamental level" (Žižek, 1999, 200) when considering social transformations under capitalism, and that these social relations are our age's "Real" – the repressed foundation of the system (Žižek, 2008, 673). The fact that we all work for a wage and are subject to the rise and fall of the market is the foundation of our ideological enjoyments. Žižek's solution to this problem is opposed to a formalist approach to class struggle that might emphasize a 'pure' revolution arising in response to the system as such. Instead, access to the "Real" comes through a contingent, particular element. In the case of the recent round of bargaining, these were the demands made by the union. The strike and ultimately friction with police and the state only result from refusing to give way on these demands (and in particular that of job security). The (class) struggle or Real that lies between those who do work and those who command it came forward via a particular demand.

The above provides the ground to produce a response to several objections made to the union's assertions that graduate students were poor and exploited and that contract faculty were having their livelihoods attacked. It was often objected that such students tend to come from privileged backgrounds, that going to school will lead to higher paying employment, that contract faculty make more than do a large portion of the population, and that the strike was simply a game played by a group of bourgeois radicals and champagne socialists. While it is true that many grad students are not genuinely impoverished, the majority of them will not become tenured faculty or be able to find a permanent job in their field; instead, as contract faculty, they will have to crisscross the province to find enough work to survive, and by some accounts work over 100 hours a week to complete the work they do find. Thus, even if the above objections are in many cases true, this is not a reason to discount the labour struggle fought by graduate students and contract faculty or its potential for wider social change.

Recognition of the accuracy of these observations raised as objections does not lessen the fact that the university is fashioned like a corporation. Žižek puts it this way: "even if the object of desire is an illusory lure, *there is a Real in this Illusion*: the object of desire in its positive nature is vain, *but not the place it occupies*, the place of the Real, which is why there is more truth to unconditional fidelity to one's desire than in

resigned insight into the vanity of one's striving" (Žižek, 2005, 339). While it is self-serving to fight for increased salaries and job security when one is already privileged, the university is nonetheless based on the exploitation of labour, designed to help fuel a capitalist economy and in many of its features mirrors the organization of the neo-liberal economy. Resigning oneself to privilege and taking what one is given solves little in this regard – if anything.

It is at this point that the reflexive turn that marks the move from a symptom to be interpreted to one that is to be enjoyed can finally be seen. Asserting a demand in the framework of bargaining assumes that there is someone other than oneself who can fulfill that demand, while one has put a great deal of (libidinal) energy into the symptom that results from the failure to have that demand met. The 'turn' comes in moving from the assumption that 'the Other' can dissolve the symptom by fulfilling the demand in question, to the assumption – recognized by Freud – that the symptom is already a solution. For Freud, however, this meant a way out of a deadlock that maintained that deadlock. For Žižek (*à la* Lacan), 'enjoying your symptom' is the act of throwing out the baby and keeping the bathwater: the deadlock disappears in giving up on the belief (and corresponding action) in a 'big Other' who guarantees the success of one's actions. In the case of 3903's 85 day strike, this means taking the organizational capacities that have been developed and transforming them into the principles governing a new form of university. This means giving up on one's old attachments to the university as it was and the "Other" that guarantees its existence – a liberal arts institution made up of tenured faculty supported by either government or private interests. It also means expanding one's newfound organizational capacities to create something radically different. *This* would bring about what Crow dreams about: a post-neoliberal university, but one that also leaves behind its liberal predecessor.

It's always like that in Onitsha

Kapuściński ends his story about the hole in the road to Onitsha with the response he received when describing it to someone else: "Onitsha? It's always like that in Onitsha" (Kapuściński, 305). As Newstadt points out, there is a rich history of labour struggle at York because the high costs of research in the natural sciences and the proximity of Canada's most research-intensive university led to the

growth of the social sciences and humanities on its campus. “It’s always like this at York” (three strikes and another almost-strike between two campus unions in a span of ten years) because it has been home to critical social scholars who are loath to let the transformation of the university slip through the gates.

Ours is not an easy fight: Newstadt also points out that these scholars are being pushed out for the sake of a capitalist political and economic system. As one Canadian labour activist notes, as an employer the state is able to change the rules of the game almost at will: between the late 1980s and 2006 the Federal government passed 13 pieces of back-to-work legislation, while the provinces passed 72 (Fudge, 2006, 28). These newly minted laws often temporarily eliminate the right to strike and often end with the imposition of long-term collective agreements. This effectively destroys two of the major strengths brought by unionization: the ability to withdraw one’s labour when it is abused and the ability to bargain collectively about what form that labour will take. Dalton McGuinty’s Liberals achieved just that, forcing 3903 to end its strike and participate in a very limited version of ‘bargaining.’

Deepening our organizational capacities is, then, only one of the possible outcomes of the struggle between the state and its employees over the “public good” alluded to above. As the neo-liberalization of York University and the erosion of labour rights continue, less desirable outcomes are also possible. 3903’s turn away from a model of participatory democracy and towards a representational one contributes to this, bringing with it a lessening of member’s involvement, organizational muster and the tendency to question the limits of liberal-democracy. The latter case can be seen in the wide-scale refusal to continue the strike as a wildcat in the face of the legislation. In this case and in others, these ways of thinking and acting are replaced with a faith in an ‘Other’ – fellow members – who will ensure effective exchange with the administrative ‘Other.’ With this faith comes the additional belief that the bargaining process will happen regardless of member’s own participation: it was repeated over and over during the strike that the bargaining team had been elected by us (although many of the members of the BT were in fact acclaimed) and for this reason were to be trusted to take on bargaining without (supposed) interference from the membership.

The question, then, is as much about why people were more inclined to accept their alienation in a 'big Other' as it is about why they didn't do otherwise. Several reasons for the former have been suggested here. The possible answer to the latter question, which in part also answers the first, pertains to the assertion above that the process of change requires two steps: analysis and the writing of history, and the end of the belief in the 'big Other.' What was left out of this equation was the role of the analyst: in the analytic situation they act as a guide to the end of analysis, and not as the agent of its imposition. At the level of 3903, the absence of a strong executive that could facilitate organization, strategy building, and analysis contributed to the decreased involvement of the membership.

If there is any mirror of our future to be found in the recent proposal to axe social sciences programs at Liverpool University in England because they are not economically competitive enough (Lipsett, 2009), it may not be "like this" at our university for much longer. That is, unless we transform the university into an organization of our own creation.

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