

Creating and sustaining communities of struggle

The infrastructure of dissent

BY ALAN SEARS

If you stop and look carefully at the front of the Portuguese Recreational and Cultural Centre on Drouillard Road in Windsor, Ontario, you see the initials ULFTA. Those initials are a reminder of the history of this place. This hall was once the Ukrainian Labour Farmer Temple, a left-wing cultural and political centre that, among other things, served as a meeting place for people trying to unionize Ford. It was one of many places in this neighbourhood that contributed to the development of the capacity for militancy that helped win the 1945 Ford strike in Windsor. This infrastructure of dissent has now seriously eroded, in Windsor and elsewhere.

The 1945 Ford strike had a lasting impact on collective bargaining in Canada. The company was intent on defeating unionism. It took an all-out mobilization to win that 99-day strike, including a massive blockade of cars, city buses and other vehicles that sealed off the area of the power plant that the company wanted to fire up as winter approached. The active solidarity of the community was crucial. Workers shut down many other plants in sympathy strikes, and many joined Ford workers on the picket line. Strikers were able to sustain themselves in part because of community support, including sympathetic local merchants who advanced them goods. Paul Robeson came to sing at a benefit concert and strikers fanned out across the province to solicit solidarity.

The infrastructure of dissent along Drouillard Road played a crucial role in the mobilization that beat Ford. The infrastructure of dissent is the means of analysis, communication, organization and sustenance that nurture the capacity for collective action. Historically, this infrastructure

has often had a geographic centre, like Drouillard Road in Windsor or Winnipeg's North End. These were particular working class areas of industrial communities, often with a very high proportion of recent immigrants. Drouillard Road was a thriving commercial strip catering to the workers at the huge Ford plants in the area. The fortunes of the area began to decline when Ford relocated much of its operation to Oakville in an attempt to flee Windsor's militancy in 1953. Few of the over 100 stores that lined the street are still in operation. Some of the taverns that once hosted thousands of Ford workers at lunch or after work are still in operation, though the atmosphere has changed.

Drouillard Road in the 1930s-1950s provides a valuable example of the richness and diversity of the infrastructure of dissent. Socialist and anarchist political organizations played an important role, particularly the Communist Party and the left of the CCF (predecessor of the NDP). There were also a small number of Anarchists and Trotskyists. Radical publications served as an important source of news and analysis, some aligned with particular political organizations and others non-aligned. Union caucuses developed as unions were organized, providing a forum for challenge and debate within unions, and in many cases producing contested elections. Left-wing ethnic organizations, like the Ukrainian Labour-Farmer Temple, combined a sense of cultural belonging for vulnerable immigrant workers with a range of community and political activities. Among other things, these halls provided access to critical space for organizing, including union drives. Within and beyond these halls were various shared leisure and cultural activities, ranging from

drinking in the bars that lined the street to participation in choirs, plays, dance groups, picnics, sports clubs and parades. All of this led to very important informal networks in neighbourhoods and workplaces, rooted in the shared ups and downs of struggles, in common experiences of joy and pain.

All this created an enormous capacity for collective action. During the 1930s Depression, there were examples of women in the Drouillard Road area banding together to resist the eviction of a neighbour who could not keep up with rent payments. The conduct of the Ford strike was hotly contested within the union, with serious debates about how to fight and whether or not the settlement was adequate. There were also broader debates within the community about the kind of workplace and the kind of society that should emerge from the 1930s depression and World War 2.

A glance back at the richness of the infrastructure of dissent on Drouillard Road at its height provides an important, if rather daunting, perspective on its current weak condition. Contemporary socialist and anarchist political organizations have very little serious weight within the working-class movement, and are too small and marginal to develop a broad perspective on the state of the struggle. I am excluding the NDP here, as it does not tend to act as an organized political force outside of elections.

There are virtually no union caucuses or organized oppositions within the labour movement. Where elections are contested, it is often battles between bureaucratic factions within the leadership and the union machine. The ad hoc groupings that emerge to challenge sell-outs and bad decisions often do not survive to fight the next battle. The spread of the automobile, suburbanization and the growth of cities mean that people now rarely share a neighbourhood with co-workers. The development of home-oriented and individualized leisure activities (television, computer games, personal listening devices) have diminished the spaces for shared activity, whether it is listening to live music or gathering for a drink. Overwork, in the home and for pay, crowds everyone's schedule.

The infrastructure of dissent on Drouillard Road developed a community of activists, with many who could think their own way through strategic and tacti-

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**Auto
blockade
during the
Windsor
Ford strike
in
November
1945.**



cal questions, and take initiative to pursue struggles and organize effectively. An important layer of individuals in these areas were worker intellectuals, thinkers whose development came not through formal education, but from the debates, discussions and educational activities tied to activism. This infrastructure provided the means to sustain memories, learn lessons and take action.

It is difficult to sustain our collective memories of struggles in the absence of a developed infrastructure of dissent. There are brilliant murals on Drouillard Road painted since 1999 by Mark Williams and other artists commissioned to represent some of this history. But the real challenge is to maintain these memories as a living legacy of discussion and debate as we try to rebuild this infrastructure through engagement in new struggles.

The weakness of the infrastructure of dissent at the present time is demonstrated by the vulnerability to bureaucratic sell-outs of even the most promising mass struggles. Even brilliant mobilizations like the strike of British Columbia hospital workers early in May 2004 or the two-week Ontario teachers' strike in 1997 can be shut down by union leaders with virtually no space for opposition or debate and only the most limited forums for learning the lessons and planning for next time.

The infrastructure of dissent will have to be rebuilt as new struggles emerge. This is not to romanticize the old infrastructure of dissent. The Communist Party, for example, often used its leading role in this infrastructure to close down discussion and

debate, as when Windsor Stalinists tried to shut down the meeting where Emma Goldman presented her pro-anarchist report from Spain at the Polish Hall in 1938. Also, the infrastructure was built for men, so that women's voices and needs were often marginalized or excluded. Indeed, the unpaid and largely unrecognized labour of women in the household doing domestic work was often the prerequisite for the development of these political and social spaces. And racist exclusion along various lines was frequently an unspoken assumption.

A new infrastructure of dissent cannot be rebuilt along the old lines. There have been important changes in the form of the city and in the way we live our daily lives. Unions have become more bureaucratic, and employers have restructured workplaces to reduce or eliminate the role of shop stewards who have traditionally been an important component of union caucuses and oppositional capacities within the labour movement.

Nor do we want to go back. We have learned (and must continue to learn) important things along the way, particularly through the anti-racist, feminist, lesbian/gay/queer, anti-war, Aboriginal and Québécois independist movements that burgeoned during and after the 1960s. The demands we place on the infrastructure of dissent are very different now. We need to develop forms of solidarity at the highest level, built genuinely around the needs and experiences of the most disadvantaged.

We see glimpses now of some of the elements that will help weave together the

next infrastructure of dissent. The internet offers incredible communication capacities for the transmission of ideas and for organizing. Social movements create spaces for activism, often with very creative forms of education and mobilization. But we still have a lot to learn about the way a fuller infrastructure might develop.

There are important things we can learn from the kind of infrastructure of dissent that developed on Drouillard Road, even if our goal is neither museum-like preservation nor reconstruction along the same lines. The importance of the infrastructure of dissent is that it is built on longer-term relationships. Movements rise and fall. Workplaces move from resignation to mobilization. Political moods shift. But the kinds of formal and informal networks that operated on Drouillard Road cemented longer-term relationships that developed collective capacities to act as a class. This means negotiating the difficult balance between the invigoration from participation in dynamic, militant movements and the commitment to the long haul. We should be orienting to mass mobilizations, building lasting networks and developing a collective memory that is not limited to the interpretation of a single political tendency.

In the end, the infrastructure of dissent is the expression of a broader left. As such, it benefits from pluralism and democratic decision-making. The nature of working class existence is that struggles will be uneven. Some are ready for militant mobilization while others are more cautious or even hostile. There is variation within and between workplaces, from sector to sector of the economy, between employed and not employed. Experiences of oppression provide different perspectives on the struggle of the moment. The capacity for effective solidarity depends on the ability to get a broader picture and take decisions in the light of varied experiences and levels of confidence.

At its best, the infrastructure of dissent develops capacities for independent analysis and initiative. An effective activist needs to understand the immediate circumstances in the light of a broader perspective, and contribute to suitable forms of mobilization. It takes important collective work to develop independent thinking and creative activism. The rich capacities of the Drouillard Road community remind us of the possibilities and the challenges. ★