

## **Fried Squirrels**

**by Stephen Elliott-Buckley - Tuesday, December 17, 2013**

<https://politicsrespun.org/2013/12/fried-squirrels/>

It's a crisp, foggy November Saturday morning in the south side of the city. Seventeen people sit in the large open area at the back end of an organic fair trade coffee shop run by a workers' co-op inspired by the Mondragon movement in Spain. Meet-ups like this are quite common in this shop.

The male and female co-facilitators move briskly through the agenda with the help of the nodding volunteer maintaining the speakers list. There are sporadic jazz-hand gestures, common from the Occupy Movement, as well as a strict yet comfortable group norm of only one person speaking at a time, and succinctly, because of the elaborately carved talking stick that moves around the room.

This is the weekly meeting of the Fried Squirrels, who meet every Saturday morning in 27 cities across the country. It never lasts more than exactly 90 minutes and is disturbed only by one of the childcare professionals in the play corner bringing the odd hungry baby to her mother in the circle for a feeding.

The agenda is diverse and extremely compelling. At the top was a discussion of next month's random flashmob that will occupy the large boulevard beside the strip mall where the provincial labour minister's constituency office is. There is a government liquor store there, too, with lots of customers eager to receive the information picket material about new anti-worker bills in the legislature. Three-hundred-and-eighty-five people showed up for the event last month, rotating their presence over the six-hour action.

Next up are the final plans for the information pickets outside the Canadian Tire and Shopper's Drug Mart, which are ramping up leading into the holiday season. There is an organizing drive at the Canadian Tire and re-certification effort at Shoppers. It looks like there will be 15-20 people at each site at all times over eight hours each Saturday and Sunday, through the Boxing Week sales and into 2014.

The next agenda item is an update on the next First Monday night Fried Squirrel panel at the college. It will include someone with an update on housing at Attawapiskat and three other First Nations communities with precarious housing, an American union organizer Skyping in with an update on best practices and lessons from the U.S. fast food "strikes;" and the Council of Canadians' national water campaigner updating everyone on the increasingly successful campaign getting cities and universities to ban bottled water.

The rest of the agenda includes the following: planning for church, mosque and synagogue presentations on the living wage campaign; the ongoing efforts to enumerate the often hidden domestic workers; coordination with Idle No More events; a day-long music festival to raise funds for the battered women's shelter; plans for a province-wide one-day study session for provincial government payroll staff threatened with being contracted out; and the related protests at all government constituency offices.

This week's meeting has representatives from three public sector unions, two private sector unions, the

Council of Canadians, the Canadian Labour Congress and provincial federation of labour, the living wage campaign, rape relief, Occupy, Shit Harper Did, green energy advocacy, proportional representation, affordable housing organizations, and the Mennonite Central Committee.

There are a dozen other organizations without representatives present today, but they check in on the agenda and minutes posted briskly on the Fried Squirrels website. The website maintains records and plans for all meetings and activities across the country. It hosts a bulletin board; a chatroom with participants around the clock; links to the Twitter, Facebook and Pinterest portals; interfaces for audio and video conferencing; an archive of Fried Squirrel lectures and panels from around the country and event photos and videos; and links to online petitions and advocacy organizations around the country and contact people in every city.

Beyond their organizational affiliations, the people in the cafe this morning include retired union activists, a few 30-something moms, a Juno-nominated folk singer, three Raging Grannies, a former Olympian, several immigrants and temporary foreign workers, two firefighters, siblings of two local NHL players, and a host of “ordinary” people who do most of the living and dying in the community.

The Fried Squirrels formed a year before the end of Stephen Harper’s first term with a majority government. People simply realized the necessity for labour, social, environmental, faith, advocacy and other groups to join in common cause to defeat widespread attacks on the fabric of Canada.

Harper once said, “You won’t recognize Canada when I get through with it.” It was always a mystery as to why it took seven years of him governing for people to believe he meant what he said. But when the Fried Squirrels first formed, they grew very quickly, in part because of the name. Two satirical Raging Granny poets coined the term “Flying Squirrels” in a song, starting with “flying squads,” adding the flying squirrel image, and then “fried,” from Friedrich Engels, who is generally considered the first to use the term flying squad. From that, the Raging Grannies spread the name around the country and the rest is history.

Or, more precisely, not yet history.

The Fried Squirrels don’t exist in Canada. Not yet, anyway. But the tools for creating this movement have been with us for years. All it takes is someone to convene the first meeting and let the membership, agenda, actions and organizational structure emerge. And if we’re clever, we’ll start now. There’s a federal election brewing!

This also appears in the current issue of [Our Times](#) magazine.