

Labour Day 2013: Say Hello to the Pavement!

by Stephen Elliott-Buckley - Monday, September 02, 2013

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Happy

Labour Day means building solidarity!

Workers in Canada and around the world have been under assault for decades, but most of our recent tactics to stop the bleeding have been ineffective. Are we lazy, complacent, overworked, obedient, compliant, subdued, afraid, docile, or fully tamed and intimidated by the one per cent?

If we don't get a lot more of our boots on the pavement, and soon, our union density will continue to decline to an impotent level. Just look at the United States. Union density does not have to be zero for workers there to consistently lose against employers and anti-worker legislators. Density just has to be low enough to dissuade against a meaningful push back.

Here are two examples of just how bad it is getting, in Canada.

In 2012, Labatt's parent company, Anheuser-Busch, made \$9 billion in profit. Not revenue, but profit! That's a lot of Stella, Becks, Lowenbrau and Blue. Yet, last April, they tried to demand concessions from their workers in Newfoundland and Labrador, because \$9 billion was simply, incredibly, not enough money for their shareholders. (A boycott campaign has begun, but it won't work until thousands or millions take part AND communicate their boycott to retailers and the corporation.)

In Richmond, B.C., on the day before the provincial election in May, and in the media frenzy of that campaign, [IKEA locked out its unionized workers](#), members of Teamsters Local 213, and then began bargaining in reverse: the longer the workers stayed out, the more concessions they would have to eat. Then IKEA was also caught hiring scabs.

The warm and fuzzy Swedish company is calling it a strike because workers can come back in any time. The rhetoric is galling, but we don't have the luxury of having our sensibilities bruised.

By the way, IKEA's 2011 profit was \$3.85 billion. Profit, not revenue. Again, not enough money for the family-owned company! Its founder is worth \$52 billion.

Despite IKEA's charming, suburban, global reputation, they have been busting unions around the world. The only unionized IKEAS in Canada are in Richmond and Montreal. If IKEA breaks the Teamsters in Richmond, what happens to the workers in Montreal and to any other organizing drives around the country? They fizzle. Seventy per cent of IKEA workers in Sweden are unionized. They're at risk. Every retail worker in Canada, including at IKEA, should be in a union.

Abandon Ineffective Tactics

Petitions and email campaigns are convenient for activists who are busy. Sending stern emails also feels good and helps us feel involved, but they're often just form letters. Even if we all added our own unique preface to the form letter, how often do they cause employers to back down. Armchair activism has run its course.

We are rarely able to get more than a few dozen of the usual suspects out to rallies. What does this accomplish? Why do we even have rallies any more? The media rarely show up. Even if they did, they often end up mocking the issue by looking for sensational personalities to put on camera. The employers are often just inconvenienced for a few hours, then it's back to union busting. If rallies never lead to a victory, why should we be surprised that members and their families and activist networks won't show up for them.

Despair is a luxury we cannot afford. It's also self-indulgent and extremely unproductive. But futility is a feeling that we can learn from. So is fatigue, burnout, complacency, cynicism and exasperation. So, let's stop asking members to show up for actions that don't work.

Smarter Activism

We need to get back into the streets, and not for 45-minute rallies. Unions have often merely endorsed exciting new approaches to pushing back against the Canadian and global elite, like the Occupy Movement and Idle No More, but we haven't delivered our members, their families and activist networks. Here's why: we haven't drawn the connections so that our members can understand that real wage growth in the last two generations has declined while the one per cent are becoming obscenely rich. We will keep losing if we don't fight back, and a lot more.

What if there was strike support at every IKEA in Canada from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. every Saturday until the end of the lockout in Richmond. And not just a rally, but real engagement, taking advantage of the opportunity to inform IKEA's beloved customers about how awful the company's labour policies are, and how rich IKEA's owners are.

But why stop there. Why not continue the rallies until every IKEA in Canada is unionized.

I know, we are exhausted. We are trapped in a hyper-consumerist society and we make less money than our parents did. So, we're behind and we aren't catching up, and we have little free time and we miss our families and friends. Still, we could be more effective with the time we've got. We can't turn this around until we help our members understand that every lockout or anti-worker piece of legislation is an attack on them, on all of us. It needs to be our job, as labour activists, to help people make the connection that it is worth several hours every other Saturday to do something like occupy the sidewalks outside all the IKEAS.

One-off rallies are not effective any more. Regular, unpredictable rallies and occupations would be better, but only if we can show our members how they will be successful.

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