

# 99

DISPATCHES FROM  
OCCUPY TORONTO

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## Safety and Community in St James Park

Megan Kinch

How does a non-hierarchical movement deal with the safety of its participants? "Occupy" encampments in many countries have been struggling with this question, and Toronto's 'occupy' is no exception. Located in the Downtown East side, St. James Park has been a refuge to many homeless people; drinking and drug use have always been present. The basic geography of the Park itself (significantly larger than Zuccotti in New York) has presented some difficulties for creating a secure environment.

Dick Johnson, who has been helping de-escalate problems, told me that it was important to be sensitive to the needs of long-term park resi-

dents: "We have to remember that they were here first and a lot of the problems are with people who were here before us. The longest resident has been living here for 10 years."

During interviews, Marshalls I spoke with described instances where individuals were evicted for being extremely disruptive but that these measures were undertaken in non-violent confrontations. One marshal suggested "We need to publicize the idea about crisis prevention and de-escalation. What we are doing here is very

different from the way society at large deals with conflict. There is a lot to learn for everyone."

Security at Occupy Toronto has concluded in some cases that it's not appropriate to call the police for mental illness or intoxication and that paramedics and crisis intervention teams are better for situations that have become too out of hand for the park community to deal with. Mental health and nursing professionals have started volunteering for the medic committee to help deal with these sorts of issues. There has been a general agreement only to involve the police in serious incidents of assault, and only when the survi-

vor wants to go that route.

General Assemblies (GAs) in particular have been a site of significant disruption. In the most serious incident a man showed his penis to the crowd during the meeting itself. But occupiers are taking steps to deal with these problems in a more significant way. A policy on drugs and alcohol (they are banned) has been passed through the GA.

Taylor Flook is an experienced environmental activist who has been a key member of many committees at Occupy Toronto that deal with safety in the park. She says that at first people were reluctant to deal with problems, but that attitudes have been shifting as the camp deals with serious issues. Two perpetrators of sexual assaults (one minor, one more serious) have been apprehended by occupiers and turned over to the police, and the camp now accepts that it doesn't have the capacity to deal with serious offenders but it nonetheless

needs to create a safer space for women.

Taylor regrets that the camp still doesn't have a firm process for reconciling difficulties and as a result still has to deal with po-



Jordon and Brooks are on the marshal team, de-escalating problems as they occur.

lice regarding serious incidents: "We don't have... a restorative justice process to actually play that out and show what healing is like, what atoning for your actions is like in a community." The need for alternative methods of security is necessitated by the

goals of Occupy Toronto, Taylor suggested: "The police have, depending on your experience, failed at the ability to mediate conflict... instead of that, what we're trying to do is create community."

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## A Dispatch from Occupy Ottawa

Owen Sheppard

Occupy Ottawa is a hive of activity as I arrive at Confederation Park on the evening of October 30th. Activists and passersby alike warm themselves carving pumpkins, playing giant chess, and converting donated freight palettes into flooring material for winterized tents. Despite near-freezing temperatures, the occupation's tent city appears to have grown by about 50% since my first visit a week earlier, notwithstanding reports of decreasing participation at GAs and meetings.

"When you step back and you take a deep breath and you see what we're doing, it's so inspiring," exclaims Lisa, a volunteer at the food table. The Food Committee feeds not only the occupation, but also many homeless people who come to the park to avoid under-funded

and often repressive shelters. Courtney, a medic, noted that many feel the camp is the safest place they have ever stayed. Other successes include creative infrastructure and provisioning solutions, such as a proposal to use hay bales for winter insulation, collecting rainwater from large tarpaulins, and accessing drinking water from a sympathetic church.

Yet alongside these accomplishments come challenges familiar from the Toronto experience. Disparate politics and values, and a seeming inability to build shared social, economic, and political analyses, have left the camp susceptible to factionalism and domineering personalities.

But perhaps most serious, several participants--mostly White, middle-class students-

-expressed a belief in "natural leaders" who have emerged from the ostensibly non-hierarchical movement. Whoever these leaders are, they refuse to acknowledge any special role within the occupation. Instead there is an insistence on the absolute, individual equality of each participant in the decision-making process.

I question if this equality is possible amid concerns over pervasive sexism, racism, and even isolated fascism within the movement, both in Ottawa and at large. And appeals to "love, peace, and community" are simply not sufficient to address these systemic social barriers to participation.

As Tom explains, measures have been taken to identify and dismantle these power dynamics. "The General Assembly passed an anti-oppression statement saying ... sexism, racism, classism, all these

things are not welcome," he said. "And that helped a lot of people who don't have much of an analysis around those issues to start to name ... oppressive dynamics and to act on them."

Leaving Occupy Ottawa, I have as many questions as when I arrived. But the echoes of splitting freight palettes in the cool night air make one thing clear: those questions, and all those raised by the movement, are not going away easily.

## Popular Education Filling Gaps Left By General Assemblies at Occupy Toronto

Kalin Stacey

Two groups based on popular education models are now creating space for workshops and classes to try and address ongoing issues at St. James Town, which include problems in consensus process, and lack of space for political discussion. They are also seeking to address the continuing presence of oppressive statements and behaviors.

The on-site “free school”, located in a white tent across from the Info booth in the north part of the park, is part of a decentralized movement of similar ‘freeschools’. Its appearance at occupy followed calls in assemblies, committees, and scattered conversations for a space dedicated to sharing knowledge and skill-building. Another autonomous group has also come forward with a workshop series ‘Who is the 99%’ meant to spur

critical political discussions and deepen the analysis of activists in the camp.

Some of the first workshops hosted in the free school sought to address the concerns raised about process and oppression in the park. For instance, the day after a General Assembly devolved into accusations of ‘reverse racism’ and ‘divisiveness’ when gender-based inequalities were called out, several participants invited occupiers to attend a workshop on challenging privilege which drew nearly 50 participants. Another class invited a discussion of male privilege and sexism in a workshop directed at cis-men [non-transsexual men]. A continuing series on anarchist theory often draws over a dozen people. Not all classes run out of the tent are so serious; the recurring recycled paper arts

class is one example of a more laid-back session.

Despite growing interest and participation in the free school, questions remain about its overall effectiveness. If the conversations inside the tent fail to filter out into the broader occupation, then the free school will not succeed in mobiliz-

ing St. James. The education committee hopes it will wind up being a space for experienced activists to help campers prepare for winter, protesters prepare for escalation, and generally-assembled prepare for a true bridging of divides to find consensus.



## Postal Worker Struggles and the 99%

Samson Jessop

Postal workers, sometimes known as ‘posties’ have been at the forefront of labour struggles this year. In addition to the well-publicized lockout this summer, rank-and-file Edmonton postal workers organized and won a victory in the fight against ‘forceback’ overtime. Rachel Stafford, a postal worker letter carrier organized with CUPW (Canadian Union of Postal Workers), is on a speaking tour to share her experience in direct action and this struggle to end compulsory overtime. Approximately 30 people attended the talk hosted at Steelworkers hall: some attendees were postal workers looking for strategies in their own workplace, others were Occupiers who realize this was a fight that could provide examples for their own struggle.

Stafford stressed throughout her talk that it was important to have confidence, and to build relationships. Talking about experiences in the workplace is the first step. She stresses that one-on-one conversations with people are a good place to start getting them engaged and organized to do something about their situ-

ation. She talks about how its best to start off with little actions like petitions and then build up to larger things like workplace refusals.

Stafford’s philosophy is that in workplace organizing “education is key” and that the success of the movement was in large part due to the “educational aimed at direct action” which laid the groundwork for a successful fight. She feels that it really started when they began doing weekend training courses in direct action. They gathered material from past CUPW movements and information from the IWW (Industrial Workers of the World). Later, they started having worker assemblies during coffee breaks to organize and discuss. After building this base of solidarity the workers decided to turn their backs on the boss as she held a weekly mandatory meeting. This, coupled with an extensive cell phone list in order to relay information on actions being performed, allowed for members of the movement to be well-informed and confident in the actions they were performing within the individual depot and in other parts of Edmonton.

Once the work refusal began the CUPW held strong by reaching out to other communities such as racialized workers who were subcontracted to do mail delivery. Previously, they had stood in solidarity with the subcontracted workers when they had an issue with the contractor which created allies for CUPW. When CUPW had their own labour fight, they suggested that the subcontractors use their right to refuse unsafe work because they would be ‘intimidated’ by the CUPW picket line. Because they had been building real solidarity over the course of years, this tactic succeeded.

There are a number of strategies that can be used in gaining what is needed. One of them is going up the chain of command; targeting the person in power that can actually affect change and marching on their office. Another approach is to increase the number of people involved in the movement; encouraging coworkers, friends, and family to pick up the cause. Little things like writing messages in chalk can build up to massive marches. Finally, the movement can start increasing

the riskiness and severity of the tactics used; from petitioning, to workers assemblies, email and phone zapping, and sit-ins can serve to increase pressure on those in power. In the end, the “decisions being made need to be made directly by the people being affected by them”. This is a principle that can also be applied here in the Occupy Movement.

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