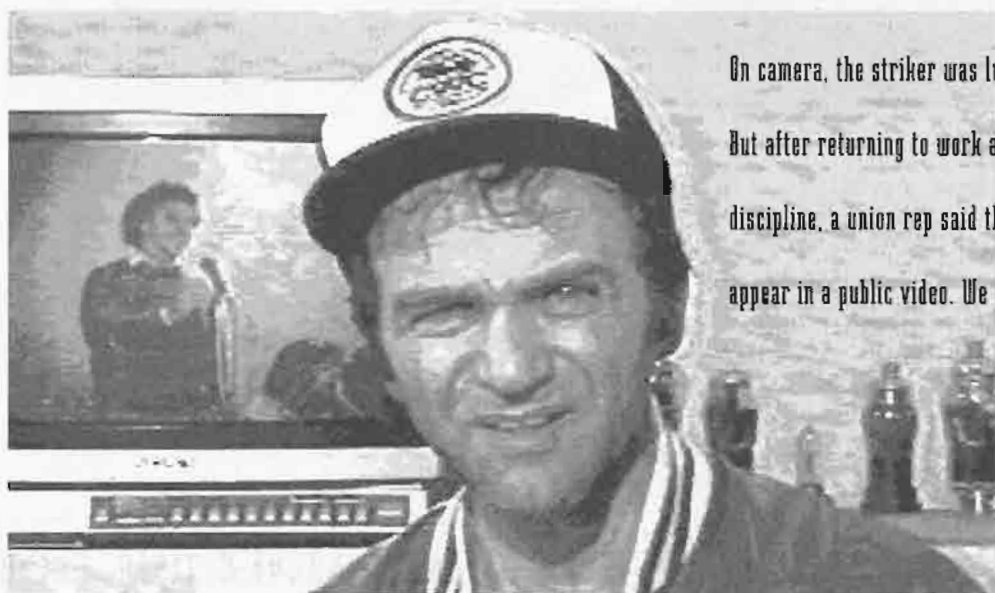


Creative Dreams and Labour's Disciplines

When Artists Meet Unions



On camera, the striker was lucid, vivid and funny. But after returning to work and facing employer discipline, a union rep said this was no time for him to appear in a public video. We had to use an actor instead

By D'Arcy Martin

PHOTOGRAPHS FROM THE VIDEO "RE-CONNECTING"

All three of us were thinking the same thing.

Denise Norman and I didn't spit it out because it was no consolation to the video director, who was losing his best footage. Don Bouzek didn't spit it out, because he liked us, and the double message from the union was our problem as union staffers, not his.

It was five months after the 1988 Communications and Electrical Workers of Canada strike against Bell Canada had been settled. "Re-Connecting," our dramatized video about the experience, was in a squeeze. We had to count on the empathy of the artist.

The strike vote had been 51.3 per cent, and we had kept going for 17 weeks in 200 communities across Ontario and Quebec, with less than one per cent of the members crossing the line. The union was now \$6 million in debt,

and we were all exhausted. The verdict, aptly stated by Diane McLachlan, president of the Orillia, Ontario local, was: "We didn't bring Ma Bell to her knees, but we sure as hell made her curtsy."

From the start of the strike, Don had been videotaping members about their experience. We all wanted the members' voices to be central to the final tape, with union leaders and actors only to complement the perspective brought by rank and filers. Our best footage was of a technician telling how he had enjoyed the strike.

One time, he said, the local police were called to clear pickets away from a Bell building in a small Ontario town. About 40 officers gathered across the street, and were forming up for a charge. At a signal, the strikers scattered however, leaving the police in tidy ranks to defend property against a non-existent

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threat — in full view of the public and a union photographer. This was Keystone Cops stuff, and the strikers were having a ball.

Within minutes, they were back on the road, where the real picket line was. In their cars, they practised “zone defense” on the managers’ repair vehicles. They let each and every customer know gently that the manager responding to their call was stealing a striker’s job. Meanwhile, the big shots at Bell Canada tried to decide whether or not to summon the police again.

It was a war of manoeuvre versus a war of position.

On camera, this guy was lucid, vivid and funny. But shortly after the return to work, he was one of a series of strike leaders to be disciplined by the employer. A union representative, trying to get the former striker’s job back, said this was no time for him to appear in a public video, visibly enjoying his defiance of the employer.

Don already knew the union had limited funds. But I was embarrassed to acknowledge that the CWC, one of the most dynamic and respected unions in the labour movement in Canada, was weak as well as poor. Of course, Don dropped his best footage to protect the member, telling me later that I had been more upset than he was.

For him and his colleagues at Ground Zero Productions, it was no big deal. It meant taping an actor instead, who would re-tell some of the striker’s stories. But the sequence became *about* a strike instead of *from within* a strike. While it may have gained other qualities through good dramatization, the story lost the immediacy and authenticity of the first-person voice.

The decision had not been artistic, but

political — a simple judgment of the balance of forces between employer and union. By being supposedly responsible, we were pushed into a subtle corner, nursing our hang-over from the binge of militancy which the strike had represented.

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Individuals of great passion, eloquence and creativity can be found within union culture.

Independent Artists’ Union

■ This is the preamble to the draft constitution of the Independent Artists’ Union, Toronto, 1985:

“Traditionally, in order to justify our economic and social marginalization, artists have been accorded a special status in society due to the creative and independent nature of our production. This special status, however, has also served as a justification to deny our creative and economic well-being.

“Artists have been confounded by the logic of ‘vision has no price, so why pay anything!’ Therefore, while we uphold the creative and independent nature of the cultural sector and the freedom of expression of artists, we do not perceive this to be a special status as such, but fundamental to the productive process itself.

“Furthermore, we do not perceive the fundamental independence of art production to contradict the basic social right to job security and a living wage, but in fact, perceive it as a means to strengthen the creative potential of that production.” ■ — D.M.



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But to develop the collective imagination in unions requires momentum and modelling. To kick-start this process, and to coach it along, labour-positive professional artists are essential.

In Canada, pro-labour artists, who are a minority in their own community, have played a crucial role in strengthening labour's side in the politics of perception. They have recognized that the cultural empowerment of workers will enhance rather than displace their work. Sharing the stake of workers in the democratization of culture, these artists play a coaching role based on respect rather than deference.

This process usually begins with a specific project, such as the video docu-drama "Re-Connecting." Sometimes the initiative is taken by a union, and artists are contracted to carry a project out. On other occasions, artists gain arts funding for a proposal, and then approach a union for support and guidance.

Artists must depict union life with respect and accuracy, and unionists need to learn to listen to artists, and to negotiate clearly the terms of alliance. As a first step, unionists must begin to take artists seriously as workers.

Artists, naturally enough, apply union principles to their encounter with the trade union movement as an employer. They resent being used as pawns in internal union feuds not of their making. And they are critical of union budgeting priorities which place their creative work below activities that cater to the vanity of union leaders, or to the class collaboration current within the movement.

The frustration of artists who have negative experiences while working with unions is not that a major market is closed off to them. In proportion, the "union market" is unlikely to

be of commercial significance to any but a handful. But they look to the labour movement for model of work relations which they can extend to other parts of the cultural economy. When something goes wrong, it echoes into the larger community.

The arts community alone carries its own internal cross-currents and pressures. There are government funders to deal with, as well as consultants and commercial dealers. And among the arts producers themselves there are different disciplines, all inter-cut by age, gender and race. As well, the politics of malice — the life of victim competition — is endemic to the arts scene. In a sector of scarcity, rivalries are not polite — after all, it is unlikely that the loser will be appointed to the Senate.

Within this politic, progressive artists have a difficult job to do. They expect union activists to respect them for what they do, and to support them when they voice their own needs.

For pro-labour artists, the Independent Artists' Union slogan of "a living culture, a living wage" captures their two primary goals. Without a vibrant arts scene, there is no context for individual creativity. With continental forces operating in the mainstream image factory, progressive artists in Canada need all the allies they can find — including the labour movement. But while most unionists would agree with placing creativity on the list of worker entitlements, placing a priority on cultural politics is another matter.

In the most privileged parts of union institutions, you can hear the argument that artists are a waste of time, and that what unions should do is simply buy the mainstream talents available on the market. With this perspective, it would make sense for a major

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union to have its design work done by the same agency that handles Purina Dog Chow.

It's true that even those unionists who see the value of engaging in an arts coalition encounter some frustrations. A musician may phone yet again with a cost overrun on a hard-won budget; a video producer may ask for work because rent is due at the end of the week; a film-maker may discuss at lunch the possibilities of forming a co-op of his colleagues, but before the afternoon is over call another union to offer services below whatever scale the co-op might set. And the subtle patronizing of workers and their organizations, even by the progressive wing of the arts community, is frustrating in the extreme.

Artists often approach unions with an inflated sense of organized labour's relative wealth in financial and organizational resources. And the habits of collectivity in union work, and the dynamics of the union culture around participation and voluntarism, can be difficult for artists to understand and respect.

Their hard-won independence from corporate sponsorship, and their negotiated arms-length relationship to government funding, do little to promote sympathy with the slow and informal processes of accountability and discipline in trade union life.

When concerns about content are raised, artists can see this as censorship or dictatorship of a line to which they don't necessarily subscribe. Such artists have a hard time feeling comfortable in the collective ethos of the labour movement. And they have difficulty in presenting their needs in a form intelligible to union culture — for example, by linking the arts to other social entitlements such as health

care, which unionists have fought for on behalf of all working people. Neither is the arts community immune to the anti-union prejudices current in society as a whole.

Tensions facing labour-positive artists have been captured with clarity and compassion by film-maker Laura Sky.

"As progressive artists — as militants," she has said, "many of us face a very visceral conflict. Often, because of the economic insecurity we face, we are tempted to compensate by buying the position that being artists affords us...the egotism of it...the specialness of it. It's a part of ourselves that we don't like to admit.

"The other part of us," she adds, "wants terribly to achieve a connectedness...an effectiveness with the forces of change in our country. We want to be able to contribute to the winning of a better life — for artists and workers alike.

"We understand clearly the necessity and the immense satisfaction that are inherent in developing a connectedness with all people who are fighting these fights." But, according to Sky, "this relation is often difficult to achieve. It's a complex process...because we must be prepared to relinquish that separateness — the separateness that says artists are better than workers."

When artists and unionists meet properly, the result is greater than the sum of the parts. We all re-connect with the passion that got us into creative work — social justice work — in the first place.■

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Artists and Poverty

■ The material needs of artists have been exhaustively studied in recent years. Reports have been written by a federal task force (the Applebaum-Hebert Committee) in 1981-82. There was an Ontario provincial inquiry in 1984. A study was done by the Toronto Arts Council in 1985, called "Cultural Capital: The Care and Feeding of Toronto's Artistic Assets." Most recently, the focus on Status of the Artist legislation — which gives cultural workers some economic and labour relations rights — has sparked updates of this research.

For unionists who think the arts are a path to wealth, a glance at a Toronto career guide on the arts for teenagers might be helpful. The following information is from "Spotlight

on the Arts," a bulletin of the Career Information and Placement Centre, Toronto, 1989:

"One in 300 actors lives above the poverty line; the average monthly wage for union actors is about \$600; of the tens of thousands of books published every year, perhaps 200 make a bestseller list, and only a handful receive awards for artistic achievement; the truly great poets, painters, sculptors or photographers are one in a million; for every musician who makes it big (or even makes it at all) in popular music, thousands of others try, or want to try; the average yearly amount of residuals (fees for re-runs) paid to members of the Writers' Guild (U.S.) last year was \$5,704."■ — **D.M.**