

Anti-Unionism: The Last Legal Hate

by Humberto da Silva

This article was written by Humberto da Silva, and describes his experience and thoughts about a picket line he participated in on February 19th, 2003. It is as relevant today (April 2008) as it was the day it was written.

We live in a society where everyone from a single mother doing a tightrope act on the poverty line to Conrad Black say that they are part of the middle class. The single mother is just indulging in a little of the opiate of the masses she got hooked on in school. Conrad is selling crack. But the Big H when you need to feel better about yourself is still definitely Hate.

Thankfully we have managed to get our ruling class to legislate, at least nominally, against the evils of racism, sexism, ageism, and discrimination because of disability or sexual orientation. These haven't disappeared, but like drunk driving, they are no longer anyone will admit to in polite company.

However there is one hate that still dares speak it's name: class hate, and because we are a classless society, this is manifested as union hate. Hating unions, and by extension, hating union members is not only acceptable in good company, it is encouraged. Racist jokes are generally now met with stony silence or a polite rebuke. But bring up those unions and everybody has a story to tell.

I spent today on the picket line with the cleaning staff of the Toronto Dominion Centre. These workers, primarily immigrant women, are some of the poorest paid unionized employees in Canada, most grossing substantially less than \$500/week. They were picketing in front of the Parking garage where the Masters of the Universe park cars that sell for five to ten times one of the full time

strikers yearly gross. This picket was a unique viewpoint from which to view numerous incidents of union hate. The rules on this line were simple: we would block entrance while the picket captain said a few words to the driver and gave them strike literature. If they took the pamphlet we let them through. Anybody who came by with a pamphlet on their dashboard went straight through. If they did not open their window or refused a pamphlet we held them up for one minute, then let them pass.

I was hit twice by cars. Once by a BMW and once by a Jaguar. Numerous times engines were revved ominously, like the cocking of a gun, so we would get the lethal message. Several cars drove through the line pushing picketers clear. After hitting me with his shiny new BMW, the driver laughed and called me: "Asshole". The driver of a Jaguar, when allowed to pass after serving his minute, rolled down his window to say: "What would you do if you couldn't clean toilets, go on Welfare?" After pinning me against a wall and then screaming off, the driver of a new Volvo gave me the finger. Although I didn't actually compile statistics, everyone on the picket line knew, in a way that you can only know when self preservation is at stake, that there was a correlation between the price of the car and the level of hate displayed toward the strikers. These incidents were particularly chilling when you consider that a car is probably the only legal way to kill someone in Canada. With a good lawyer you can get off with nothing but an increase in your insurance rates.

Earlier in the day officers from the Industrial Disputes section of the Metropolitan Toronto Police had stopped by the picket line to explain the rules. A constable had kindly left his telephone number in case we had any problems. When I called after the

BMW incident I got an answering machine.

Upset, I did the only thing I could do. I went for lunch. But for some reason my food court chicken teriyaki tasted like cardboard. It looked good. It smelled good. But it turned to sawdust in my mouth. Something like this had happened to me before and I recognized it in myself as a symptom of depression. I suddenly realized that my mood had suffered a serious negative alteration that morning. I felt depressed. But I couldn't fathom why.

I ditched my half eaten lunch and went outside for air. I was going to take a walk before returning to the picket line, but instead, I stopped and observed it from across the street.

The hostility and hate of the drivers crossing the picket line were palpable. In the heat of confrontation and the challenge of survival I hadn't really noticed that the drivers of most of the vehicles were seething with hate for unionized immigrant working women who didn't know enough to know they don't have the right to hold up a Master Of The Universe from his Manifest Destiny for Even One Fucking Minute, Bitch.

Last year, in a course about racism, we the participants did presentations about how racism had manifested itself against our communities. I did a presentation on the issues that early Portuguese immigrants had faced. But as an english speaking, university educated white boy, I had no personal experience of racial hate. But this afternoon, for one minute, just one lousy minute, I knew what it was to be hated.

And it wasn't because of the colour of my skin, or my sex, or my sexual orientation, or any disability.

It was because my heart is on the left.