

VICTORY FOR THE CAMP OF THE CAFETERIA WORKERS AT THE NEW SCHOOL

*Maoist Communist Group
Communist Student Group*

On the ninth day of the occupation, **the main demand of the cafeteria workers was met**: the layoff was rescinded and 31 union jobs were restored. This was the direct result of the cafeteria occupation, organized by Communists and supported by a mass of students and outside forces. ***This represents an unqualified victory for the working class and the people.***

How was this victory achieved? We can answer this via a brief overview of the struggle.

(1) We came to the cafeteria workers' resistance struggle with a broad **political** aim: to advance the revolutionary process in relation to the question of state power at a historical moment in which proletarian subjective forces (i.e., communist political organizations) are at a historic low point. But there is **no straight line** from **resistance to revolution**: an economic struggle **against particular bosses** cannot directly lead to a politics, understood as the force of the whole, which requires the proletariat to formulate and implement a **positive political program around which it can organize all popular forces**.

Politics only entered this concrete struggle obliquely. The economic contradictions (principally, workers versus boss) exposed the need for political organizations of the working class. **The source of the weakness of labor in its antagonistic struggle with capital is the political weakness of the working class in society as a whole.** The need for political forms of organization was obscured by actors narrowly focused on the economic struggle, which necessarily resulted in different forces trying to instrumentalize each other: the trade union using both students and workers, students and workers using each other, the administration using contradictions within the popular camp to its advantage, and outside left groups using the situation as a simple occasion for recruitment.

This fractured conception of politics is entirely foreign to our conception of politics as an **alignment of forces**. In the class situation of the cafeteria workers, we tried to instrumentalize only ourselves, as a tool for workers and students to construct autonomous forms of political organization.

(2) The Communists put out a call to occupy the cafeteria in order to **seize the initiative** by striking a **concentrated blow** and reverse the relation of forces in favor of the workers. This allowed a **popular camp of struggle** to form, based on the massive mobilization of more than 150 students. A small core of cafeteria workers constituted themselves as a social force. Late in the first day, the **May Day Worker-Student Struggle Committee** was formed as a leading body, composed of Communists and workers. Through the struggle committee, workers could formulate their demands and determine a plan of combat for further discussion in general assemblies.

(3) The seizure of initiative and subsequent formation of a camp of struggle with broad rear supports **quickly pushed the union and the administration to begin negotiations**. In the early stages of the occupation, the administration sent for a delegation of Communists and workers to meet with them in their offices. However, our aim was not to enter into negotiations, but to use our collective power to dictate the terms of an agreement, to impose a victorious resolution of the struggle. After we refused to send a delegation to administration offices, a parade of representatives came to visit us from the enemy camp: various administrators, union representatives, and the university president himself. This reflected **the reversal in the relation of forces achieved by the occupation**.

(4) The proletarian line was for **worker leadership over the camp of struggle**. After a promising start, **this possibility receded** under pressure from the administration and UNITE HERE, the cafeteria workers' union. When one worker joined an off-campus action led by students, the union threatened them with termination. As one worker said, "*The*

union rep said we're not supposed to participate. She said, 'you guys gotta tell the students to stop the occupation, you guys can't participate with them, you guys are going against the contract.'" After a few days, the struggle committee dissolved.

The union not only barred the workers from participating in the occupation, but it **generally prevented them from playing an active role in determining their own future**. "I'm not going anywhere! How can they exclude union workers? We have a right to be there: whether they are negotiating a contract, proposal, whatever." The union told several of the workers that they lacked sufficient knowledge to participate in negotiating a resolution to their own struggle.

(5) With the core of workers removed from the occupation, **the focus of the camp of struggle turned inward, as if the occupation was not a weapon in the cafeteria workers' struggle, but an end in itself**. There was increasingly less discussion of the worker struggle: no assessments of its steps, no determination of tasks in light of such assessments, and no political debate – i.e., on the class struggle around the question of state power, for example, regarding the question of trade unionism in the proletarian revolutionary process. General assemblies increasingly took on a petty-bourgeois ideological class character, reflecting the composition of the occupation: from horizontal and leaderless concepts of organization to all manner of identitarian demagoguery (we were told, for example, that we should not criticize a particular union representative for selling out the workers solely because he was born in Puerto Rico).

(6) However, a distinct threat for the university loomed in the form of the **graduate student employee strike** on May 8. The evening of May 7, the enemy camp – the union and the administration – sent out an email assuring students and faculty that an agreement to hire back the workers had been reached, without notifying most of the workers, effectively **encouraging everyone to cross the picket line in the face of the imminent strike**. UNITE HERE was not alone: not a single union on campus respected the picket.

The broader goal of the email was to **block the unity of the two struggles**: the university attempted to use the resolution of the cafeteria workers' struggle in order to neutralize the threat posed by the graduate student employee strike. The agreement to enter into negotiations for a contract was formalized on May 10, with a joint statement by the union and the administration promising to eventually make the workers unionized employees of the New School. The statement once again actively urged people to disrespect the picket, calling upon "*the students occupying the cafeteria to peacefully vacate the space for the benefit of the entire University community.*"

(7) Ultimately, **the popular camp of struggle imposed a resolution on the enemy**. In the words of one worker, "*The union is trying to take credit for it. They are trying to say 'yeah, we're trying to get your jobs back,' but if it wasn't for you guys occupying the kitchen, none of this would have happened, it still would have been the same way right now.*"

The principal positive lesson: ***it was concentrated popular force alone that led to victory for the cafeteria workers.***

(8) While **we won the main battle**, we recognize that **the struggle continues**: until the workers have a real contract and as long as the old management remains in place, the struggle is not over. It is our task to organize **with the workers** to win these demands in the future.

All workers signed the agreement, and not one remained active in the occupation. A worker struggle without worker involvement, much less worker leadership, has no purpose. Without the workers, and with a dwindling mass of students in the face of the ending semester, the **relation of forces had once again been reversed**, with the enemy camp again enjoying the upper hand. **An occupation without force is merely symbolic. For this reason, we decided to withdraw from the occupation following the victory, on May 12.** We announced our withdrawal at a general assembly, but we decided not to make our announcement public on social media at the request of the remaining occupiers.

(9) Following the resolution of the worker struggle, effective leadership of the occupation has been taken over by students committed to drawing upon the “expertise” of academic Richard Wolff in order to reorganize the cafeteria as a **model self-management utopia**, conceived as a transition out of capitalism. Do such schemes, viewed in their objective dimension, offer a path to social revolution?

Marxism emerged and developed precisely against petty-bourgeois idealists who advocated the construction of such utopias. **Against the idealist theory of the model**, which locates the motor of history in external examples, Marxists hold that social development proceeds through the **immanent** development of real contradictory forces – that is, contradictions **within society**, and fundamentally, **the class contradiction**. Regarding the builders of utopian models, Marx wrote, with evident irony: *“They will then perform the experiment before our eyes, and the rest of the world, overcome by the force of their example, will do the same.”*

As long as the imperialist bourgeoisie rules society, self-management is only a form, more or less masked, of extorting surplus-value from workers. As Marx put it:

“Restricted, however, to the dwarfish forms into which individual wages slaves can elaborate it by their private efforts, the co-operative system will never transform capitalist society. To convert social production into one large and harmonious system of free and co-operative labor, general social changes are wanted, changes of the general conditions of society, never to be realized save by the transfer of the organized forces of society, viz., the state power, from capitalists and landlords to the producers themselves.”

(10) We want to **transform the whole system**. For that we require organizations completely different than those needed to resolve particular and local struggles between workers and bosses, which – no matter what we call them – are always **trade unionist in essence**. Trade unionism separates the working class from politics – that is, from the question of power and the state – confining workers to their workplace, preventing them from becoming the advanced detachment of their class and the leading core of the whole people. As for politics: to paraphrase Lenin, under bourgeois rule it is reduced to the right of the working masses to choose which representative of the exploiting class will represent and oppress them in parliament.

Against this miserable and narrow conception of politics, we must build organizations that will allow the proletariat to independently practice its own politics, with the aim of reconstituting our forces in the line of social revolution.

maoistcommunistgroup@riseup.net
csg@newschool.edu