

# Performance of Labour

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In our call for this Forum we invited reflections on urgent questions about the state of unrest in North American universities by invoking the performativity of both scholarly pursuit and academic work. We were particularly keen to engage with the energy of the moment—the spring strikes of Teaching Assistants and contract faculty at both York University and the University of Toronto were already well underway—hoping that critical reflection might beget yet more critical (performative, creative, political, intellectual) action.

In their writing, the authors who responded to that call proposed a set of questions rather than answers, staging a subversive return of Althusser's, "Hey, you there!" ("Ideology") in their reaction to a complexly layered interpellation—for, who was being called to answer: a union member? an academic? an administrator? a grad student? a scholar? a striker? a performer? an activist? And what could be the shape and life of that response? In what number? In what medium and to what end? The tendency of these authors to insist in and on the lingering questions, rather than offering answers, seems right to us.

Months later, at the moment we pen this introduction, the York and University of Toronto labour actions have ended. It has been an uneasy and unsatisfying ending for some; these new contracts will expire as early as two years from the time that the authors included in this Forum composed their thoughts and impressions of the strike. Certainly, the story of this labour unrest has not concluded and the conversation extends beyond the institutions being interrogated here. There have been and are currently similar strikes, actions, and conversations across North America, Europe, and elsewhere as globalization moves towards ever more standardization of the academic and pedagogical machinery.

But what is the system we belong to as scholars? Is it in fact a "machinery?" Is it an animal (echoing Samur's metaphor)? A market (as we have become used to referring to it)? This system (machine? animal? market?) surely needs a revival... It is struggling, and its portended collapse is already affecting thousands of current and future seekers and makers of knowledge. Can we accept the current conditions as the foundation upon which our future as a knowledge-making civilization will be built? If we accept its terms, then we perpetuate them, humiliating and excluding many brilliant minds and bodies in the process. Our activist, political, scholarly, and creative actions have to respond to, redefine, revivify, and perform other desired futures. Beyond our individual struggles, when we come together, we can once again remember (because our memories, alas, are weak!) that as feminism taught us: the personal is still political! When we're called to embody a subject we don't recognize ("Hey, you there!"), we must grab our colleagues (friends or strangers, all possible characters), turn (or twirl as in dance) and say (or chant): "Yes, *we!* *Everywhere!*" For we are many and we share much despite our precious and important differences. But we can only share and shape the future of our work if we can learn to listen to each other, learn to join voices, so that each may be heard. A song, a dance, demanding to be seen as an allied multiplicity, demanding respect for our work and for the pursuit of knowledge and creation, wherever it happens to be found, can upset the complicities implied in and

demanded by the interpellation-isolations that the neoliberal capitalist knowledge market/machinery attempts to perform upon us.

## Works Cited

Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." Trans. Ben Brewster. *Marxists Internet Archive*. 7 Nov. 2015. Web.



## Witnessing the Growth of a Collective Animal

SEBASTIAN SAMUR

*I write the account below as a future member of CUPE 3902. Though the University of Toronto strike did not affect me directly, its indirect effects for me were real and omnipresent. My classes were moved off campus in support of the strike and the growing rallies in which I occasionally participated sent a message that was loud and clear. It was fascinating to watch the growth of the strike movement in spring 2015, and though its conclusion left one with mixed feelings, it also left many reasons for optimism in the future.*

I remember an early student's union meeting that addressed the likelihood of a strike. Many potential scenarios were discussed, and while the strike appeared likely to occur, it seemed as though it would only last a few days. The grievances expressed were relatively subdued, and the possible outcomes presented, from best to worst case, were not very encouraging. The weight and urgency of the situation had not set in, as students weren't particularly optimistic and heavy thoughts about the months ahead were either absent or held privately.

This all changed when the strike was called, albeit gradually. Given the time that had passed since the last strike in January 2000, there was a huge learning curve as the collective animal the strike movement would become learned to walk on its legs. What does it mean to strike and how do you do it effectively? The first days were marked by trial-and-error experimentation, as well as the continued belief that it would not last long. As a non-member of the union, I only saw brief glimpses through email and social media of what was taking place. Focus was fragmented with the uncertainty of what was beginning to unfold. It takes group coordination to make the animal move.

A week or so into the strike, two things became clear. First, the strike would likely last longer than anticipated. Second, and more importantly, came the realisation that individual problems relating to graduate life were anything but individual. As students between departments and faculties collaborated, it became clear there was a common struggle. Eased by its gradual erosion, many had learned to privately accept exacerbating difficulties, and subsequently forgot their gravity and ubiquity. But the strike served as a catalyst, leading to a growth spurt in the political animal. Suddenly focus became more united, outreach increased, and collective work creating songs, signs and puppets accelerated. As students stood side-by-side, leading to a number of rallies at Queen's Park, the