Engineers on Strike: the University of Michigan Graduate Student Strike of Sept. 2020 by Corin (Corey) Bowen, she/her/hers, former member of GEO 3550

The pandemic brought fear to everyone, but fear is mitigated by power. For us graduate students at the University of Michigan, the power differential between the administration and the workers had never felt so great. COVID broke out among the university bus drivers, and one died. The bus drivers wanted to assert power, but they didn't see any path forward. Undergraduate students who tested positive were forced into dilapidated housing and left to survive on chips and candy bars. The undergrads wanted to assert power, but they needed tremendous support to do so. As grad students, we knew we had two options: assert worker power through our union or lose it entirely.

At the same time, Ahmaud Arbery was murdered for going for a run. Breonna Taylor was murdered for sleeping in her bed. George Floyd was murdered for shopping at a corner store.

The College of Engineering hosted a panel with Black students to highlight their experiences. I remember one undergraduate student's testimony as if it occurred in slow motion. He described walking into an active learning classroom, where students are seated in clusters at big tables around whiteboards. The students in the room turned to look at him as he entered, and one laughed. At him. For existing.

I love to teach, and I have taught in that room. The same room. That could have been my office hours the student described. I cried and cried.

Was this forum meant to predicate change? We supposed it was. But the university quickly made it clear that these events were intended to generate sympathy alone.

Some were tempted to try to keep separate the fear of COVID from the fear of racism. In such a white and wealthy space as U-M, many are indeed able to keep these fears separate, but some are not. I'm privileged to be in the former group, but some of my peers and students are not. The convergence of COVID and racism became the basis of our movement. We rose in a furor.

The strike lasted for 9 days. I was up by 4 and marching by 5. I'd last until mid-afternoon, until I physically couldn't continue. Then I'd go home, have zoom calls and phone calls, meetings, helping to organize the next day's picket sites and strikers. I'd work until I couldn't keep my eyes open, around 10. Then I'd get up and do it again.

My GPS watch told me I was walking 15 miles a day. A woman on my line sustained an overuse injury from marching and was in pain. She kept coming anyway, chanting while limping. I'd ask her to take breaks and rest.

My throat ached. I knew I didn't need to scream into the megaphone - it amplifies your voice, after all - but I couldn't not. By the end of the third day I could hardly speak. Other strikers quickly learned to lead the chants and took over for me.

Early one morning, in the dark and the rain, we shut down a university loading dock. A frustrated and afraid worker plowed through us with a large truck. Luckily no one was hurt, but we were so upset. We felt so vulnerable.

I'd never felt so exhausted, physically and mentally, as I did during the strike. But I'd also never felt so proud.

I helped organize the pickets on the University of Michigan's North Campus, which is populated with engineers along with urban planners, artists, and musicians. We were mostly graduate students, but lecturers, undergrads, and community members came and joined our lines. A group of undergraduate art students painted us a banner. I thought it was the most beautiful thing in the world. Staff members visited our lines and voiced their support, thanking us. Bus drivers and motorists honked and waved as they passed. People brought us coffee and snacks. Sometimes we didn't even know who they were. We were so grateful.

Early in the strike, we shut down a North Campus construction site early in the morning. We were successful in preventing construction work that day, but the conversations with the trade representatives were difficult, and we were all very nervous. Then a man showed up to join our line who had participated in the historic month-long strike of our union in 1975 that led to the ratification of our union's first contract. With him marching alongside us, we felt like we were walking on water. We weren't just making history - we were our history.

On North Campus, we spent more time in informal picket circles and marching to generate visibility than we did blocking access to buildings and sites. This was due to a historical lack of union presence on North Campus and in the engineering graduate student body. But the frequent divergence from more militant striking actions had some distinct advantages; people could join us who weren't able to participate in the formal picketing activities. Individuals could come and go as they needed. Families joined with children in strollers. Kids shouted into megaphones. Dogs marched alongside their people and even sported signage. We took breaks for snack time, discussion circles, and chalking. We built a community, and we loved it. We learned that labor - and engineering - needs this organizing model.

Sometimes, on our lines, we needed a break from chanting. Sometimes we read essays to each other on empowerment through collective action. Sometimes we shared about ourselves and our motivations for joining the strike. An engineering graduate student shared that this was the first time in their Ph.D. program that they felt like they were making a difference. Everyone on the line nodded in agreement.

Sometimes, to take a break, we sang. Many of the old labor ballads are just that: ballads, and they can be quite depressing. So sometimes I'd sing the group verses from Solidarity Forever, which is a little more upbeat. We sing it like this:

"They divide us by our color; they divide us by our tongue, They divide us men from women; they divide us old from young, But together we shall stand against a harm to anyone, For the Union makes us strong!"

Solidarity, forever.