

A Big Gay Garden: Cultivating Collective in Str*ke Time

dp patrick and Allied Calendulas Against Bulldozers

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On March 5, 2018, the Canadian Union of Public Employees Local 3903 at York University began what would become the longest strike in the history of post-secondary education in Canada. For nearly five months, hundreds of teaching assistants, contract faculty, and graduate assistants held picket lines on both of York's Toronto campuses, faced down the employer's threats and surveillance, and endured physical, emotional, and financial hardship to fight for better learning and working conditions. As winter turned to spring, the daily routine of setting up pylons and barricades at dawn, talking with sometimes hostile, sometimes friendly drivers trying to enter campus, attending lengthy meetings, and trying to 'play by the rules' was wearing thin. Enraged and exhausted, members began expanding their strategies for surviving the grueling experience of the two-month-old strike. Just days after May Day, when union members used direct action to stop a Board of Governors meeting being held on campus, those arriving to the Main Gate of the university were greeted by a freshly tilled and planted patch of ground mulched in the colors of the anarcho-syndicalist flag: The Big Gay Garden (BGG) was born.

Approximately fifteen by forty feet, the BGG was a highly visible, tactile, and tactical intervention into the symbolic and material geographies of the campus and the political praxes of the strike itself. Initially, the garden comprised neat, regular rows of daisies, calendula, broccoli, herbs, lettuce, and tomatoes. As picket lines were consolidated, a difficult tactical decision taken at the BGG itself, more weary members joined the core group of Gay Gardeners in tending to and hanging out at the BGG. The core group held primary responsibility both for maintaining (i.e. watering) and for protecting the space outside of regular hours, often finding creative ways to redirect resources to do so. There were plenty of 'volunteers' who planted, pruned, and weeded while others relaxed, fo(a)rged new relationships, and took breaks from more stressful duties. Along with allied community members, they brought new skills *and* plants, including corn, beans, squash, roses, pansies, and coneflowers.

During its 154 days of life, the BGG redirected both the mood and the mode of the strike away from maintaining fraying factions and thinning lines toward maintaining life and sustaining relations. Decidedly prefigurative, the BGG grew in the cracks of official union spaces. Gay Gardeners prioritized playful experimentation in the face of seriousness, practiced ease as an antidote to burnout, and offered spaciousness in response to suspicion and scarcity. Through a diversity of tactics, the BGG simultaneously

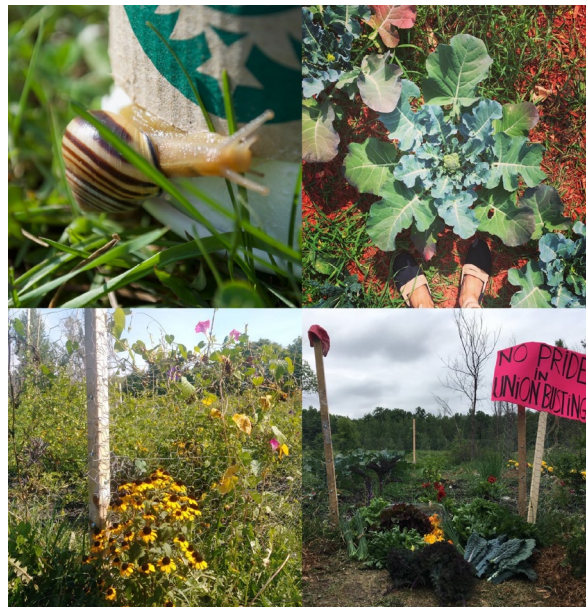
emplaced, embodied, and expanded collective desires for horizontalism, community care, mutualism, and repair. By interrupting the exhausting rhythms of the strike, the BGG midwived a shift into str*ke time, a mode of relating both to each other and to the land and its many inhabitants with greater curiosity, compassion, and reciprocity. Tending to the BGG in and as str*ke time taught us that the land itself has the power to absorb and transmute collective grief, rage, anger, and despair into nourishment, beauty, sweetness, and delight.



As with other direct actions organized during the strike, the decision to plant a garden challenged hierarchies within the union, especially between conservative factions favoring capitulation and those of us who such factions once described as “left-wing adventurers.” The Big Gay Gardeners coalesced through shared interests in radical ecology and land-based resistance and by deep desires for repertoires of relating that emphasized healing over hierarchy. Most of us did *not* arrive as experienced gardeners. Planting the garden expressed a shared willingness to practice our principled belief in the power of prefigurative action. The BGG could work if we did.



Welcome to the Big Gay Garden! The garden was prominently emplaced at the Main Gate of the university with the central administrative building looming in the distance. The full-sun site posed numerous challenges, not least a lack of easily accessible water. Collectively confronting these challenges mirrored our desire for engaged solidarity and accountability that troubled divisions and exclusions within and beyond the labor movement. A banner reads: “The worker must have bread, but they must have roses too.” Framed by flags of Local 3903, the Mohawk Warrior Society, and Six Nations, the BGG centered the work of patiently repairing relations.



Str*ke time moved at a snail’s pace. Such slowness afforded time to reclaim our responsibilities toward ourselves and the land sustaining us and required a humbling return to basics: trash pickup, fetching water, weeding. Gardening taught us to transmute

difficult emotions and persistent political tensions through noticing, listening, navigating conflict, admitting defeat, harvesting insight, appreciating beauty, laughing. Together with the *rudbeckia* (lower left) that anchored the four corners of the garden, which Gay Gardeners dubbed Rude Becky, we abided and adapted to the punitive procedures of institutional politics and harsh weather conditions alike.



York's "This Is..." campaign suggested that the university was a place for 'preparing engaged global citizens.' Located directly adjacent to the BGG, this billboard became a favored spot for 'civil disobedience,' which BGG'ers took to calling 'soft crimes.' Owing to its prominent location, the BGG invited, if not demanded, constant rearticulation and reimagination of the impact that the strike was having on the very 'engaged citizens' that the campaign interpellated. The administration's initial refusal to engage the union had inspired the chant "CUPE wants to bargain." Their persistent refusal to bargain eventually begat the remix: "CUPE wants to garden."

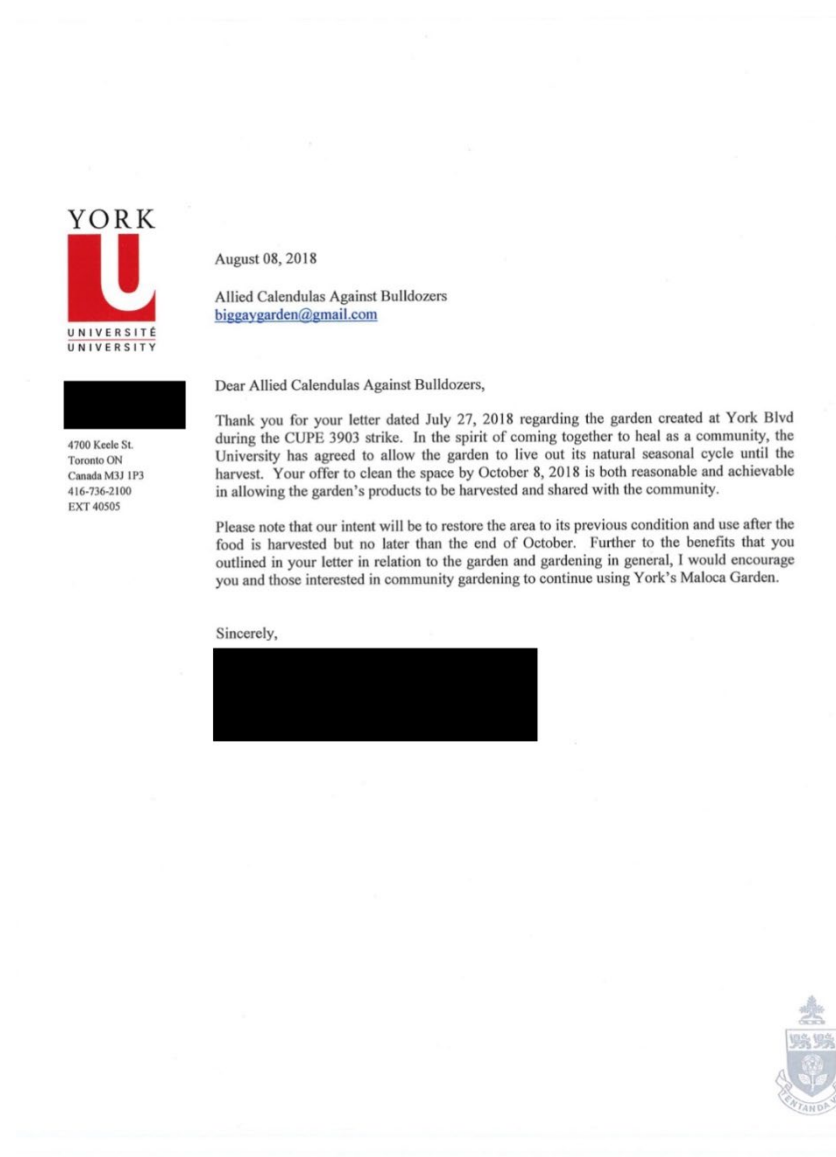


By early June, the BGG was becoming a key site for widening our responses to the aporias of the strike. As we came to know and trust each other through the slow work of tending to the garden, we began composting. Announcing the university's "Pride Month" events, President Rhonda Lenton tweeted her congratulations to the right-wing Premier-elect, Doug Ford. The BGG responded by organizing Str*ke Pride, a workshop and a counterdemonstration that adapted tactics and aesthetics from global transfeminist movements. Our capacity to turn this political nihilism into a colorful counterdemonstration nourished and expanded the practice of engaged solidarity.



Living into the meaning of the Big GAY Garden, Str*ke Pride drew attention to the disavowal of queer and feminist labor and to the university's systematic silencing of survivors of sexual violence, which was a key issue in bargaining. Str*ke Pride also responded to hypermasculine and reactionary repertoires of political action within the local. Union spaces sometimes, if not often, left little room for care, slowness, joy, and deviation from procedural norms. The BGG's celebratory unruliness tended toward

queerness by encouraging self-expression, self-irony, and generative failure. One did not have to be a “good gardener” to be a gay gardener.



Two days after Provincial back-to-work legislation forced an end to the strike, the BGG wrote a letter rebuffing the administration’s framing the space as part of a pattern of “harassment” and “property destruction.” Refusing the characterization of collective healing as destructive, we wrote: “As the caretakers of this garden, we would like to see the final harvest and allow the plants to return to the earth, rather than be unceremoniously uprooted.” Surprisingly, the administration conceded, yielding a rare victory and affirming the garden as one of the few aspects of the strike that made a frequently inhospitable campus convivially communal.



Despite their concession to the BGG, the university proceeded to pursue harsh reprisals against five union members and three undergraduate organizers. On the final date stipulated in the letter, the BGG organized Respectfest, a legal defense fundraiser that took its name from the administration’s hollow calls for “respect” and “compassion.” Featuring fresh food, live music, custom tie dye t-shirts, and an auction of items including vegan bike tube floggers, Respectfest supported the formation of an unlikely coalition that provided material and emotional support through the protracted legal battle. The final crop of tomatoes was harvested and turned into a tart, delicious chutney.