



The Brief

Vol. 3 No. 8

A project of the NB Media Co-op

May 2012

nbmediacoop.org

Trying to understand a tragedy

By MARY BURNET

Mary Burnet writes about the death of Raymond Taavel. Taavel, 49, died from injuries incurred during an assault, which took place in the early hours of Tuesday, April 17th in Halifax.

This week I have spent my days reading news articles and blog posts about Raymond Taavel, crying, and selling Pride flags to solemn customers.

I work at Venus Envy, the queer feminist sex shop and bookstore on Barrington Street. Since Tuesday, all of the customers who have come in to look at the many rainbow flags, bracelets and buttons we sell have only expressed kindness and solidarity.

This is not true all of the time.

Last week I was working by myself when I noticed some strange behaviour from a customer. The large, 30-something man was staring and gesturing at other customers and talking to himself. When everyone else eventually wandered out and the two of us were left alone in the store, he came very close to me and asked, “Are there cameras in here?”

“Yes,” I lied, nervous.

“Do they have microphones?”

“No,” I said.

He proceeded to tell me that he was watching the other customers because he knew what they did. He knew that gay men came downtown to sell their children to other men at Reflections. It sounds ridiculous, this gay-man-as-pedophile homophobic propaganda, but he was a large, angry man with obvious mental/behavioural issues. I was a small queer woman in a store with a large selection of rainbows, and I was shaking.

He left after he had finished venting. But the next morning, when I was working alone again, he came back. He was following people around the store, talking to himself, staring at me. I didn’t know what to do. We have a panic button at the store for emergencies. Pushing it brings the police. But this was not an emergency, and I don’t like the police.

I called my co-worker instead and she told me she would be at the store in a few minutes. She’s clever and calm and good in a crisis, but if this stocky man with hateful, deluded ideas about gay people was to become violent, it felt like there really wasn’t much we could do about it. After she arrived, we quietly discussed the situation and decided to call our boss to ask her to come downtown. Safety in numbers, we thought.

The man left the store before our boss arrived. She had called the police. She was looking out for her customers



Gay activist, Raymond Taavel (far left), was beaten to death outside a Halifax bar on April 17th. He is shown here at a Fair Vote meeting in Halifax last year. Photo by Steve Caines.

and her employees, and I respect her choice. But I felt deeply uncomfortable when the two officers came into the store and began asking me about the man. What did he look like? Did he threaten you? Was he aggressive?

Which way did he go?

The police are very kind when I’m a young white woman just doing my job, contributing to society. But when I’m at a protest they will follow orders to hit, kick, and pepper spray me. If I had been one of the queer women arrested and detained

during the G20 protests in Toronto, as I easily could have been, I would have been subject to threats of rape, vaginal-digital “searches,” and homophobic threats and insults by officers.

Police blame rape victims for “dressing like sluts.” Police give black Muslim cyclists fines of \$1,316 for eight bicycle violations in the course of two minutes. Police beat native youth unconscious and... *(continued on page 2)*

Worker to organizer: an interview with USW's Mario Fortunato

By CHRIS WALKER

Chris Walker interviews Mario Fortunato, a labour organizer in New Brunswick, about current labour struggles.

CW: You have been involved in organizing labour unions with the United Steelworkers for how many years now?

MF: Twelve years.

CW: Originally you started out working in a mine, which mine was it?

MF: Heath Steele, it was a copper mine just outside of Miramichi. I did exploration drilling with a diamond bit drill.

CW: And how did you get involved in organizing?

MF: In the late 1990s metal prices dipped and the mine shut down. From there I took a job at a dairy operation. It was draconian. There was no union and they had developed a very efficient system where they worked you to the absolute limit. If you missed work because of an injury you lost your job. It was a really exploitative system, nobody had health benefits, family members would be promoted over more qualified workers, and eventually I had enough. I started talking to an organizer about forming a union. I would talk to other employees about it and they would say, “You better watch it, you’ll get fired for talking about this!” I would say, “Who cares? I’m not making any money anyway; I’ll go work at Tim Hortons if they fire me!” After I signed my union card I started working on the inside, promoting the union, visiting our other locations and eventually our bid to form a union was successful.

CW: So how did you end up working full time as an organizer?

MF: It was a lucky break – essentially I got fired! The company was not happy with me – for obvious reasons. They stopped scheduling me for shifts; they took me off the schedule indefinitely. It wasn’t legal, it was purely punitive so I went to the union office and told them what was going on. I wanted to see what we could do about it. At that point the union offered me a job as an organizer. That seemed a better option than fighting to get my job back. That’s how I became an organizer.

CW: For someone unfamiliar with the process, what does a union drive look like? In other words, what do you do for a living?

MF: My job is to convince the Labour Board that the workers at a particular site want a union. How we do that is through the signing of union cards. Through signing a card the workers are indicating anonymously that either they want to form a union or want to have a vote on whether or not to form a union. Once the union is certified the workers have the right to bargain collectively with their employer.

CW: Unions generally receive bad press, particularly when they strike. Groups such as the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies (AIMS) refer to them as “labour market rigidities” and therefore condemn unions for bringing inefficiencies into the economy. To what degree does this negative portrayal of unions impact workers?

MF: First of all, there are a lot of groups out there like AIMS. They are funded by capital and their job is to provide negative spin against unions. The same is true for the media generally. When there is a strike and a reporter contacts us they are only interested in what the wage demands are. They never want to hear about any other issues, such as health or safety because they want to portray the unions as greedy. So when I meet with a worker to talk about forming a union some people will say

things like, “A union will only protect lazy people” or “I don’t want to pay union dues.” It’s amazing really. I’ll meet with people who are earning substandard wages and getting bullied by management and their only hope to improve their working conditions is through forming a union. Often these folks will be victims of serious disinformation. If you think unions are bad for workers consider this - the professors at... *(continued on page 2)*



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