

My Internationale
by Sarah Kanouse

117th Street, Chicago. Dust rises in sheets from the hard-pounded ground, hesitates for a moment, and disperses on the dry wind. Hulking steel and concrete structures, their functions lost to Free Trade, rust ominously. A few second-generation industries—mostly recycling and storage concerns—set up shop in some of the scattered outbuildings, and a trickle of dirty pick-ups checks in and out at the guard post, though the automatic gate seems permanently raised. They take little notice of the car, my videographer, or me, a young woman with a battered, vinyl-sided suitcase and a HAM antenna tuned to a commercial FM frequency.

Burley doesn't seem to exist here anymore, and this broad, open field seems a lot worse for nearly 70 more years of industrial wear. In the flickering newsreel images I've seen, the field was grassy—a meadow even, a place where the strikers might have wanted to picnic before marching over to the picket line on that Memorial Day in 1937. I size up where the police line might have been. Hard to tell. After the shooting started, people began running, and the police charged with clubs. This will have to do. I set down the suitcase and antenna and begin to set up. This is near enough to where it happened. The Memorial Day Massacre. The cables are connected. I switch the battery pack on and press play.

This memorial is silent and, aside from my figure squatting with a case in the dust, invisible. I have two minutes of silence in which to think—think about what I am doing, think about the Memorial Day Massacre, think about the massacres that are still being done to this landscape and others like it. The metal box, its whirring fan faintly audible even in the wind, is reorganizing a sliver of the electromagnetic spectrum, encoding it to carry my *Internationale*, more dirge-like than martial, to the unsuspecting receivers of passing cars.

This broadcast, at 117th and Burley Av., is only one of several memorials I have been making to old labor struggles. They are radio monuments, monuments composed of radio waves. Two minutes of a silence that is not empty. A slight, invisible, ephemeral memorial that doesn't make heroes of the fallen, doesn't fix the narrative, doesn't pretend that the story—of the massacre, of the battle, of the labor movement, of capitalism—ended any differently or better. I do not make the bronze plaques, stone monuments or epic murals often sought by labor groups for their permanence and aura of legitimacy. I am not inspiring or instructing but commemorating these events and their ambivalent outcomes, and the temporary interruption of frequency-modulation-as-usual resonates in satisfying ways with the battles I am marking.

A radio monument seems humble and self-effacing; it's almost impossible *not* to overlook it. The disturbance to the commercial frequency on which I am broadcasting is so localized that passing car radios may flicker with only a few notes of a strange, sad march before resolving again to a steady, static-free mix of Top-40 and commercials. On the other hand, there is unquestionable bravado about modulating electromagnetic waves

for one's own purposes, and squatting a frequency licensed to one of the most powerful communications concerns in the country takes at least a little chutzpah. Pirate radio, broadcast over a commercial station even for just two minutes, claims the electromagnetic commons as something not to be controlled by corporations. In this way, the symbology is similar to the strike, whose power as metaphor derives from the claim that labor is something not to be controlled by bosses. Far beyond than the material 'losses' the corporation sustains as a result of frequency tampering and labor unrest, the loss of unilateral power is what is feared and legally proscribed. I broadcast for people who were killed challenging powerful companies to respect rights—to associate freely, to be paid fairly, to mitigate the greatest workplace hazards—that seem obvious, humble, and not much to ask. My illegal broadcasts echo, with much less danger, the walkouts and demonstrations they commemorate by presenting a simple yet confident challenge to the elaborate legal structures protecting capital.

As memorials, however, the broadcasts fail. Their content—a distorted, slow, mournful *Internationale*—does nothing to remember the specifics of the events they mark, to make the dead live on in history, or to provide future generations useful lessons about the sins of capital. Transmissions are limited by space and time, and radio waves dissipate with distance and the interference of solar radiation. FM will not travel forever, receivers cannot pick up yesterday's broadcast, and radio as a material remains local, reaching only as far as its signal can be found. By inscribing the memory of these people into the ether, I am sending them a little way into the world to be destroyed again, to relive the tragedy of their death, to be forgotten once more as soon as the broadcast is done. My dissipating memorial suggests that more important than remembering a series of leftist battles in all their journalistic detail is the *attempt* to recall, to focus on the liminal place between remembering and forgetting, to understand the hows and whys and for whoms of forgetting.

The two-minute broadcast is over. I press “stop” right on time, shut off the power, and begin packing up. Popping off the cover, unscrewing the coax, and re-winding the cables is always a time of let-down, of regret, of asking questions like ‘what am I doing this for’ and ‘what good is it to anyone?’ In rejecting heroic monuments for whispering memorials, am I simply replacing one kind of romanticism and nostalgia for another? Are my radio monuments paeans to the futility of revolution, bitter tears shed over the failure of the labor movement to end alienation, build solidarity, and quit conceding to capitalism? At the core of it, then, are these monuments to ancient battles created with an antiquated technology ineffectual, cynical, resigned, or, worse yet, complicit in their dependence on the total despoliation of the airwaves and landscape for their impact?

Of course there is nostalgia in commemoration. It is comforting to look back to when things might have been different, to connect with the moments where we imagine revolution may have been possible. I am nostalgic for the lost belief in that possibility, and the despoiled airwaves and industrial landscapes are powerful signifiers of that loss. Nostalgia has been much and often rightfully maligned for constructing revisionist and deeply conservative ideas about an idealized past. However, a self-conscious nostalgia,

one that foregrounds the selectiveness of *all* memory, can be a position from which to reach beyond simple mourning or commemoration toward renewed and informed action.

In this era of digital convergence, there is something apparently anachronistic about radio that conceals what a contested resource it remains. Countless movements of oppressed people continue to use pirate and licensed radio to organize, communicate, and persuade. Radio is not yet obsolete, and the recent split in the AFL-CIO indicates deeply felt differences in strategy and priorities that could spur new, more progressive activity and growth. The compulsive reverence with which I conduct the broadcasts—mass communications that reach only a few people, if any, accidentally and for a few seconds, memorials that communicate nothing about what is being remembered—admit that their own exaggerated nostalgia for romantic battles is a dead-end. The layered failures of my monuments, the exaggerated modesty of these memorials, ultimately admit the inability of “remembering” to do *anything* in itself, that there must be some response outside of art to these battles, these massacres, and the current conditions of the land and airwaves where they took place.

Sarah Kanouse is a tactical media artist who teaches at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, where she is proud to be represented by the SIUC Faculty Association, IEA/NEA.