

Monson Wins With A KO For Anarchism

Anarchist and professional mixed-martial arts (MMA) fighter Jeff Monson was in Belfast in March to fight Lithuanian Sergej Maslobojev in the main event of Cage Wars' "Decade" in Belfast's Kings Hall. Never shy about speaking his mind on politics or his opinions about capitalism, Jeff literally wears his heart on his sleeve, as evidenced by the many political tattoos he displays. Organise! was lucky enough to arrange for Jeff to give a short talk to local anarchists and MMA fans about sport and politics. Jeff arrived the morning before the fight, having flown from Florida to New York and then to Belfast. When we met him, he'd only been off the plane three hours, and was still nursing an injury from a fight he had won the previous weekend. Jeff was also scheduled to give a grappling seminar straight after the talk, and then be whizzed to the fight press conference that evening. Long day eh?

For those who don't much about Jeff, he's a fighter from Olympia, Washington, affiliated with American Top Team. He's a Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu black belt and a two-time ADCC Submission Wrestling Champion, one of the most prestigious grappling tournaments in the world. He is also a veteran of the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC), Pride and various other promotions.

In 2006, after a 3-fight winning streak in the UFC, Jeff earned a shot at the UFC heavyweight title against freak of nature Tim Sylvia. Jeff lost an epic five-round battle on a points decision. After pushing the fight hard for the duration he was unable to overcome the foot taller Sylvia's reach advantage. His recent form is also convincing many that he's still amongst the top of the heavyweight category in MMA.

In addition to being one of the top grapplers in the world, Jeff is also known for his anarchist views and affiliations. Monson is a member of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). He has also been an outspoken critic of the war in Iraq. Prior to competing full time, Jeff worked as a mental health counsellor, having studied psychology to masters level in university.

The theme of Jeff's talk was billed as 'Sport & Politics' – a theme broad enough to be of interest to people from both political and MMA/grappling backgrounds. Members of Organise!, Workers Solidarity Movement, and the French CNT were present, as well as local grappling and MMA fans. While limited publicity and last minute confirmation meant attendance could have been higher, the discussion managed to span a broad range of topics, reflecting the diverse interests of those present. Topics covered the nature of wage-slavery, access to health care, and inequalities in UFC wages. After an initial introduction, Jason from Organise! gave a brief summary



Monson (centre) with some of those who attended his 'Sport and Politics' talk on Saturday 28th March.

of what anarchism is, and what Organise! as a group does in Belfast. Jeff then spoke for around 15 minutes on his upbringing, how he got into anarchism, and his experiences as a fighter. This was Jeff's first trip to Northern Ireland, having previously visited the Republic before, and he was excited to meet with local anarchists, as he had done in Manchester and Paris before. He describes his own background as somewhat privileged and blinkered until he attended college – "I grew up sort-of middle class... suburban USA, my parents bought me a car when I was 17, I never went without. I was a 'RA-RA-USA' type... didn't know about the world, about world events". It wasn't until he attended university, studying a psychology degree that his eyes were opened to economic inequalities and abuses of power. During graduate school, Jeff took classes in Community Psychology, and attributes his politicisation partly to two influential lecturers who described the dynamics of power and espoused libertarian views. "We talked about how money, tax payer's money was being spent. This was a time y'know of Ronald Reagan, 'Reaganomics', the 'trickle-down effect'... I kinda got a crash course from those professors in the way the world works".

At home, Jeff was beginning to see the effects of capitalism on his doorstep; "you'd go walk down the street or the other end of town and

there's see people that didn't have things, and the excuse was always 'oh well they don't work hard enough' or 'they're not participating in the economy', and that 'if you work hard enough, you'll get whatever you want' and you believe that."

Travelling the world served as another wake-up call – "when I got into fighting, my eyes were opened-up. I was able to travel... Brazil and the Philippines, the Middle East, I was able to see the most extreme poverty you've ever seen in your life, something that they wouldn't even show in the movies". This consciousness-raising effect of his travels lead him to ask "why is this happening?" Afterwards, he became involved in the IWW, with the Pacific North-East being a somewhat more politicised area, in radical terms at least, than elsewhere in the States. His fighting gave him a degree of credibility – he wasn't a rebellious teenager angry at the world, here was a guy with a graduate education, earning his keep as a professional fighter, but questioning the system that means people don't even have their basic needs met.

Jeff described his involvement in anti-war activity, such as his participation in a blockade of a shipment of arms to Iraq from a port in his home state, Washington. In 2007, he also used the platform of a press-conference after winning at Pride 34 in Japan, to criticise the US presence in Iraq. Additionally he's currently facing

charges for spray-painting anarchist graffiti on his state capital building and military recruitment centres. But Monson maintains there's nothing extraordinary about anything he does just because of his profile as a competitive fighter, and reserves his admiration for anyone involving themselves in fighting back against capitalism – "people taking off work, risking their jobs, or taking off school, for a passion that they have... what they believe in... sleeping in churches, other people's houses, communicating with people they don't know".

One of his main reasons for being involved in politics, is a fundamental belief that everyone is entitled to the basics of what it takes to live in society; healthcare, education, transport to name a few. But capitalism, a system based on profit, not need, where we don't control the products of our combined social labour, results in us competing amongst ourselves for the most basic requirements of living; food, clothes, and shelter, Monson sees this as tragic – "we should keep the competing to the cage, or to the chess-board, or to the football field." Monson's point is clear. We shouldn't be competing with each other just to survive, but the precarity we all face under capitalism leads to us competing for everything from housing, to jobs, to school places for our children.

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