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Interview: NYC anarchist at the G8 in Japan

Andrew Flood

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The 34th G8 summit took place in Japan July 7th to 9th 2008. Andrew Flood interviewed Diane K. a member of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and the (US) Northeast Federation of Anarchist-Communists (NEFAC) who traveled to Japan from New York to take part in the summit protests and counter summit.

Q1. Tell us a bit about yourself?

I currently live in NYC, supporting myself as a freelance journalist and filmmaker, and a recent graduate of the Master of Arts program in Media Studies at the New School. I have also been an active member of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) for a little more than three years now, and more recently became involved with the Northeast Federation of Anarchist-Communists (NEFAC). Prior to becoming involved with these groups, I was heavily involved with the Independent Media Center, devoting seven years to the founding and maintenance of New Jersey Indymedia.

Q2. So what brought someone from New York city to Japan for the G8, its a long way to go?

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What brought me to Japan? Well, back in March a long-time friend and comrade from the IWW, Sabu Kohso, was tabling with a group mobilizing against the G8 summit, called the “No! G8 Action Japan: World Info-tour.” He told me it would be great if I came to Japan to protest the G8, although it wasn’t really my cup of tea at first. While working on internationally rallying people to protest, he was also working to cultivate a relationship between the IWW and the Japanese union of precarious workers, called the Freeters’ General Union. Since he had developed this relationship, he and the IWW’s International Solidarity Commission (ISC) planned to further this by sending a delegation of workers to Japan to coordinate and stand in solidarity with the Freeters’ Union in protesting neo-liberalism.

Since I had participated in international solidarity work in the past and understood the importance of it, especially as it is our extremely powerful tool in fighting against global capitalism, I decided that going as an IWW delegate would cultivate our unions’ common struggles. It was a long way to go, but definitely worth it!

Q3. What sort of preparation was done in Japan against the G8 in advance of the summit?

As I mentioned before, the No! G8 Action Info-Tour mobilized hundreds of people from North America, Europe and Asia to head out to Japan. In Tokyo and Sapporo, Japanese activists from a variety of organizations and unions had spent months coordinating for the anti-G8 activity. Included in this was setting up a vast independent media network involving three IMC studio spaces in Sapporo, distributing press badges to the internationals, and coordinating coverage of every event and action surrounding the G8. Also, organizations such as the No! G8 Action set up panel discussions and events, including the Counter G8 International Forum which took place in Tokyo and Sapporo, with speakers from all over the world.

Q4 How many people attended the counter forum and were these mostly ‘internationals’ or locals?

I would say there was a healthy mix of locals and international at the forum, a rough estimate would be about 500 people attending.

Q5. What was the role of anti-authoritarian organizations in this?

If it weren't for anti-authoritarian organizations, there would not have been an oppositional presence to the G8 in Japan. These non-hierarchical organizations made up the infrastructure of our activity, and included Indymedia, the WATCH Legal Network, the Freeters' General Union, and the Irregular Rhythm Asylum, which is the anarchist infoshop in Tokyo.

Q6. Do you have an impression of what shape the revolutionary movement is in Japan both in terms of anarchist and left organizations?

It seems that a reaction against Western capitalism is really what's shaping the movement out there. Much of their activity is similar to the type of work we do in the U.S. — such as building labor solidarity and creating more democratic media — and I would say that their organizing structures are similar as well. I think that since the country itself is so geographically isolated from North America and Western Europe, we do not always hear about the work they are doing out there. It is sometimes hard for us to network with them based on this, but at the same time their movements are connected with some of the struggles in Korea, Malaysia and Australia.

Q7 Outside of the G8 what sort of activity are these organizations involved in?

As I mentioned, the Freeters General Union is the organization that I spent most of my time there working with, so I can tell you a little bit more about what they do outside of the anti-G8 activities. Their name is a compound of “free” and “Arbeiter,” the German word for “worker,” and they define themselves as a union of free-lance workers who live on earnings split between several jobs, and temporary workers and day labourers.

One of their larger campaigns was a struggle against the Kanto Toyu Co., LTD. – a Japanese member of the Shell Oil Group – that had fired part-time workers on the pretext of the rise of oil prices and financial instability. In protest, the Freeters’ actually camped at a gas station where workers had been laid off. More recently, they have been involved in a struggle with the Temporary Workers Union against the Goodwill Group, a temp agency that had recently gone bankrupt due to illegal company practices, and fired its entire temporary staff unit. The Freeters consistently attend the Goodwill workers’ protests, meetings and events while explicitly giving support to these campaigns.

As for the other groups, I am not very familiar with their activity outside of the G8, but you can view most of their information from links on the left of the page: media.sanpal.co.jp

Q8 Did you have the impression that the local organizers thought the summit organising was going to be useful to them in the future?

Local organizers personally told me that they were gaining a valuable learning experience from all of their activities leading up to and surrounding the G8. For most of the locals, it was their first time coordinating some of the things we utilize and seem to take for granted in an area where we protest globalization summits every six months or so – such as housing, food, legal and medic teams, rally permits, independent media, and jail support. Now it seems that many of the organizers are experts in coordinating mass actions, and I’m assuming the same can be said with the future in organizing mass social struggles.

Q9 What main lessons would you take from the whole experience, either in relation to the summit protests or from seeing organising in Japan in general?

All in all, I (re-)learned that meaningful social struggles can only happen when people are organizing in their own communities, while building relationships of international solidarity with struggles worldwide. While “summit-hopping” gives many activists

an adrenaline rush and their own little spotlight, protesting at these large demonstrations really only has a symbolic impact on the nature of global capitalism, and it is not a sustainable form of action that everyone can be a part of. This is not to say it doesn’t have an effect, if it didn’t then they wouldn’t have held the summit out in the most remote mountains of a G8 country. But it is to say that we all have the ability to make choices in our actions, and sometimes we let our egos take hold over us. I hope that people will continue to focus more on the work that needs to be done at home, focus on it in a way that actually involves participation from everyone who is impacted, and do it without an expectation of egotistical glory.