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Rallies, 'Black Bloc' and the Meaning of Direct Action

Collective Action

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betrayal and broken promises, and results in a pervading sense of powerlessness. And yet we are far from powerless!

Direct action teaches us to control our own struggles while building a culture of resistance that links with others in struggles. Solidarity and mutual aid find real expression and as our confidence grows so too does our ability to change the world. It is needed now more than ever, and we also need a campaign which opposes all cuts and fees, which is controlled by its members and participants, which is ready & willing to promote direct action and is willing to fight. Such a campaign must be geared towards escalating the struggle to the point of a general strike – anything else is likely to fail, and we cannot afford to fail.

But where can we find an alternative?

First, it is crucial to build an anarchist political organisation, with a clear agenda: mobilising and educating the working class, building counter-power, and fighting the class enemy.

We need to move beyond theoretics and leaflets titled ‘anarchism is awesome’ to building a social movement that is relevant to everyday lives and rooted in self organisation, collective organisation; confident to take it to the bosses and acting as a genuine threat to the status quo.

Over the last couple of months we have witnessed an unprecedented wave of large demonstrations. Across Australia people have risen in opposition to the current administration’s escalation of attacks on worker’s rights and conditions, erosions of living standards and civil liberties.

Oxford educated arch-bigot Tony Abbott has managed to mobilise and unite angry trade unionists and students, those without work, single mothers, and Indigenous Australians. All are demanding a better future and environment for ourselves and future generations.

Recently up to 10,000 people from across all walks of life demonstrated in Sydney against the federal budget, which is about handing over more wealth and power to Tony Abbott’s friends in big business. This push is no surprise given the natural tendencies of austerity capitalism and the weak nature of the left and wider trade union movement who are unable thus far to amount any effective opposition and instead pin their hopes on the Labour Party, who will continue with the same class war when in power.

Anarchists visible from all stripes also took part in the march, a large section of whom instead of engaging and interacting with the rest of the march decided to isolate themselves through radical posing as a version of the ‘black bloc.’

While it is important to minimise the ability of the state to gather intelligence and maximise anonymity there is always a time and a place for this, especially whenever there is an opportunity for confrontation and moving beyond the ritual of marching from A-B. In this case it was a wrong move. From a practical and security point of view, a handful dressing in black often hinders rather than helps this anonymity. It enables the police and intelligence services to quickly identify and isolate perceived ‘trouble-makers’, instead of blending in with the rest of the march.

However, this balance of power only becomes a problem when a handful turns into hundreds. Black Bloc is a tactic, not something to be fetishised, and key in any understanding of any tactic, includ-

ing a sit-down, is to know how it does and doesn't work. For example, the difference between attempting to blockade a detention centre or during a picket line which has a clear objective and potentially empowering result, as compared to a pointless sit-down in the middle of the road.

The complete weakness and isolation of the anarchist scene was further highlighted whenever there was an attempted 'sit-down' by up to 20 people which was shunned by the rest of the marches. When asked what was the point of this 'sit-down', I was told that basically we need to do something – in other words action for the sake of it. It is this lack of political maturity without prior planning and an end goal that highlights the chaotic and individualistic nature of anarchism in the city. At the end of the march when people began to leave there was a minor stand off between over a dozen anarchists and the police as they began to force people off the road as some shouted 'police brutality' and a 'police state.'

No surprises then as passers-by looked on with bewilderment and blind indifference. The anarchist movement in Sydney and elsewhere needs to seriously reflect on where it is going and what type of movement it wants to build. Militant street confrontation and workplace resistance will not be built through a handful of 'black bloc'ers but through organising where we live, work and study with a clear strategy and interacting with wider mass movements and the wider class rather than isolating ourselves. Alternatives such as Sydney Solidarity Network represent an important step in fostering and spreading anarchist ideas of collective direct action though building confidence and solidarity because there are no short cuts to social change.

But what is direct action?

From the black bloc 'having a go', to going on marches, from smashing up a McDonalds, to attending a picket, from throwing bricks,

to going to fundraising concerts for single issue campaigns – all of these activities have had the term 'direct action' applied to them.

Direct action has been confused with actions that are probably best termed as 'symbolic' – and which are, on many occasions, ineffective. A lot of the confusion has been due to the media terming anything that they regard as outside the perimeters of 'normal protest' as 'direct action' – however, some confusion is down to activists themselves confusing the terms. Many activists, for example, regard protests such as the G8 summit as direct action, but these types of protests, even if they are successful in shutting down the event, remain merely symbolic.

Direct action has also become a by-word for violence, to the extent that much of the anti-war and anti-globalisation movement talk specifically about NVDA – Non-Violent Direct Action. That's not to say that people engaged in direct action shouldn't defend themselves or that violence is never acceptable – simply that this view of direct action is partial and not an accurate representation.

Direct action is a rejection of the notion that working-class people are powerless to change their conditions. Improvements to our lives are not handed down benevolently from above – they must be fought for. For libertarian communists direct action is more than an effective means of defence or even of going on the offensive and changing something for the better. Direct action is, for the working-class:

“A continuous schooling for their powers of resistance, showing them every day that every least right has to be won by unceasing struggle against the system”. (Rudolf Rocker)

Direct action is an essential preparation for the free socialist society that we strive to create. Through engaging in direct action, even when we made mistakes, we have the opportunity to learn from experience that there is no need to leave things to 'experts,' professional politicians or even activists. We should have learnt by now that that course offers us nothing but disempowerment,