

Learning from May Day

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Anti-Capitalist Strategy direct action, militancy and building the movement

The experience of May Day brings up us back to some of the perennial questions thrown up by counter-summits protests: how do we broaden our movement and what role do direct action and confrontational tactics have in that process. These are, of course, the issues that have been mainstay of Red and Black Revolution debates over the past few years but have been usually viewed through the prism of events outside of Ireland. The following article is a personal account of the Dublin Grassroots Network's approach to such issues in relation to May Day and goes on to argue for increased tactical flexibility from anarchists within the anti-capitalist movement.

DGN and direct action

The two defining, and in Irish politics novel, characteristics of the various Grassroots groups -including DGN – has been the advocacy of non-hierarchical organisation and an insistence on the importance of direct action in protest. This emphasis on direct action has undoubtedly helped libertarians carve out a political space for itself. However, it is clear from May Day and other events that Grassroots groups have planned over the past three years that we are primarily focused on spreading libertarian ideas and regard direct action as only one, albeit vital, element of libertarian struggle. This approach has meant that at least as much time and effort has been spent on making persuasive arguments and distributing leaflets as planning actions.

Furthermore, many of those actions could be characterised as “fluffy”, “moderate” or even simply symbolic. Some of the visiting protestors thought that we should have been much more confrontational. I would argue though, that our approach was principled but pragmatic and that we had to take local sensibility and political experience into account. I think this is why May Day was a relative success. What is important is that we communicated our ideas to a fairly large amount of people and we did so without compromising ourselves. This doesn't mean I think we did everything perfectly or that the same approach would yield the same results in the future but simply that at that particular time in Ireland these were sensible choices.

To discuss this properly I shall first clarify what sort events DGN envisaged when planning the protests and what level of confrontation we imagined this would entail. The overall strategy and the main aim of the organisers of the No Borders weekend was to plan events that could potentially involve large numbers of people (including any acts of civil disobedience). As street confrontations are, more often than not, determined by the cops it was difficult to know in advance how all this would pan out but the actions were devised to minimise the possibility of arrests and to avoid physical confrontation without giving away our right to protest.

So generally, over the May Day weekend DGN chose to defy rather than confront – more akin to a pink/silver bloc approach than black bloc tactics – and The Critical Mass, the No Borders picnic, the RTS, the Top Oil Action and the Bring the Noise march, and the mass direct action at Fitzwilliam Square are all examples of this. Many of these actions had some element that could have been deemed illegal but the hands-off policing policy employed for most of the weekend meant that this never became an issue.

Early on in the planning process disruption tactics such as blockades were also mooted as was the possibility of direct action at the banquet centre itself but nobody within DGN advocated targeting property or employing militant tactics against the police. Most activists, anarchist and

non-anarchist alike, thought that widespread property damage or attacking the cops would be counterproductive and inappropriate in an Irish context. At the same time DGN consistently reaffirmed our support for a “diversity of tactics” in resisting neo-liberalism both at home and abroad. DGN organisers were conscious of how at anti-capitalist events elsewhere divisions and splits had emerged between various alternative globalisation factions over the issue of militant tactics and because of this strived to avoid the terms violent or non-violent to describe the planned protests.

In Ireland, one bloc fits all

So why did DGN chose this “fluffy” approach? First of all Grassroots and its spin-off activist groups are broad libertarian coalitions which includes people who are convinced pacifists and this has definitely had some influence on Grassroots initiatives. But the question then remains why most of the anarchists within DGN, who are not pacifists, fully supported this approach. In practical terms, DGNers knew that we were not a small part of a general mobilisation, we were wholly responsible for whatever mobilisation took place.

The small size of the anti-capitalist movement in Ireland and the magnitude of the security operation meant that militant action would probably attract very few people onto the streets and, in all likelihood, result in beatings and arrests. In the long term it was also thought that such forms of protest would alienate people and provide a pretext for the criminalisation of anti-capitalist activity in the future. However, more importantly these choices also reflect in a very fundamental way the political orientation of most Irish anarchists, including the WSM, who believe that mass participation and direct action should be one of the main objectives of anti-capitalist activity. This does not mean that we oppose other forms of protest and resistance but that we think that this orientation to “mass politics” is more likely in the medium term to build the confidence and momentum of radical social movements.

Push it, push real good

In the run up to the May Day weekend it was impossible to know if groups apart from DGN were intending to use more militant tactics and we were concerned to accommodate a diversity of tactics while ensuring that there was a clear demarcation between groups that wanted to use different methods of struggle. The obvious logic of such a demarcation is to give people participating in protests the choice of what sort of actions and risks they want to take. To this end the DGN organisers of the Bring the Noise demonstration met with most of the international visitors before May Day. It was agreed that any group who did not want to abide by the general guidelines drawn up by the march organisers, including using “any form of offensive physical confrontation”, should do so away from the main march.

This is why the most confrontational action of the weekend, taken by the “pushing bloc” at the Ashtown roundabout near Farmleigh, was done separately from the main Bring the Noise march. This bloc was made up of a mixture of foreign activists including the Wombles,¹ some DGN activists and Irish black blocers. Their attitude was that it was important to contest the

¹ The WOMBLES (White Overalls Movement Building Libertarian Effective Struggles) are a loose anti-capitalist group in Britain that dresses in white overalls with padding, helmets and breathing protection at protests. They should not be confused with the animated children’s television characters, the Wombles.

boundaries imposed by the state on protest so when the DGN march finished they emerged from the crowd, largely masked up and in formation, and advanced on the police lines. With only a hundred or so people within the bloc and another few hundred from the Bring the Noise contingent behind them there never was any possibility of breaking through the police lines. In fact, I don't think, even if every single person at the protest joined in, this would have been a possibility without the use of molotovs and other weapons. This was never on the cards and consequently the whole incident had a stagey quality as if we were all playing our allotted roles in a grand spectacle of rebellion.

However, the pushing bloc did not see the action as an exercise in futility but a visible and empowering act of resistance. It is open to debate whether this action was a positive thing for libertarian politics in Ireland but my own opinion is that, on balance, the pushing bloc's symbolic confrontation was an important part of the May Day weekend and a good, if unplanned, example of diversity of tactics in action. The pushing bloc could certainly not have acted without the existence of DGN's larger protest and although their action had no chance of success it served a purpose by showing that through solidarity resistance is possible.

Tactical flexibility and strategy

May Day shows that, as a movement we need to avoid being boxed either by others or by ourselves by defining ourselves simply as the militant direct action wing of the anti-capitalism. Popularising our ideas and methods of struggle can take many forms and May Day worked because we took this into account when planning our actions, dealing with the media and cooperating with groups outside DGN. Unpredictability, imagination, and a willingness to defy any limitations imposed either from within or outside will, I believe, broaden and strengthen anarchism. Sterile purism, dogma and formulaic thinking, on the other hand, will ensure that anarchism remains an obscure tendency of left wing thought confined to dusty rooms above pubs. The difficulty is, of course, to be tactically flexible without abandoning the passion and the combativity at the heart of the anarchist tradition. This demands that we are scrupulous in assessing our own activities and clearly distinguish between media stunts, symbolic protest and genuinely effective direct action. In that spirit, the worst lesson to draw from May Day would be that same tactics will necessarily work in the future or that we can avoid confrontation and still achieve our aims.

Anarchism is nothing if it is stripped of its willingness to confront power and the tactical choices made over May Day are not in any way a blueprint for future struggles. We have quite rightly criticised the old left for ritualistic and meaningless forms of protest and we need to examine our own politics with the same rigour. If we are simply going through the motions, whether repeating the same type of symbolic protests or property damage at a summit, we will end up as bad as the Trots.

Organisational Problems

1. DGN fucks up with accommodation

A couple of days before May Day the police discovered and shut down the squat that was intended to serve as a convergence/accommodation centre during the protests. Although the 100–150 or so international activists were all found somewhere to sleep, this loss obviously caused difficul-

ties. Without a proper convergence centre in which to debate and discuss issues related to the protests many of the international activists felt excluded and blamed and resented DGN for not providing what they regarded as basic facilities for a protest like May Day. On the other hand, a large number of Irish activists felt they were doing their best in difficult and stressful conditions and that the visitors were treating DGNers as disreputable tour operators rather than comrades. Unsurprisingly, over the week a very discernible them and us attitude developed between some Irish and English anarchists. (It should be noted that the visitors were a very heterogenous group and 'some' means only some).

This led to further difficulties when the Indymedia centre began to serve as the default convergence centre with people hanging around, eating and drinking. This was not what the Community Media Network (CMN) had agreed to when it had made their premises available to Irish Indymedia and it ended up creating tensions and misunderstandings between people from CMN/Indymedia and people from DGN. CMN/Indymedia had no problem with meetings being held in the building but understandably felt that if the place was treated as a social centre it would undermine its role as an alternative media hub. On the other hand, some of the visitors believed that Indymedia, as a constituent part of the anti-capitalist movement, should make the space available to them because DGN hadn't provided any other options. This underlying tension flared up in innumerable little incidents. At one point tempers were so frayed that CMN activists were pushing to have the Indymedia centre shut down early because of the behaviour of some international activists.

The lack of solidarity and the rudeness of small minority of visiting activists was not the real cause of the problems though. The blame rests with us in DGN for not thinking through the consequences of issuing an international call out without having the capacity to provide the basic infrastructure for visiting protestors.

Why did this happen? While many people in DGN have had a lot of experience organising protests and campaigns of various sorts we had not, until May Day, organised anything that included the sort of logistical support that an international call out demands and we underestimated the work that it would involve. The group dealing with accommodation provision was too small and included activists who were already burdened with an extraordinary amount of work. We should have collectively made much more of an effort to support them or made the decision that we were not in the position to provide accommodation much earlier. This highlights one of the observable drawbacks of the working groups model that we used when people are overstretched; difficult and problematic tasks, such as accommodation provision, get doled out as a way of taking them off the agenda rather than really dealing with them collectively.

Wisdom in hindsight is a fairly useless luxury but it is also worth reflecting on how we took an international model and applied it wholesale to a local context without entirely thinking it through and how that ended up colouring the perception of a good number of the visiting activists. As effective network building both between various elements of the Irish anti-capitalist movement and international activists is one of the secondary aims of events like May Day this stands as one of DGN's greatest failings over the weekend.

2. DGN's Legal support

Similarly, DGN's legal and defendant support work was more piecemeal than it should have been. The main reason for this is that once again we left an important job in the hands of too few

people and we failed to understand just how much preparation and effort is needed to do such work effectively. Because of this, going into May Day, we didn't have a proper bail fund and ever since May Day a small number of people doing legal support having been trying to play catch up.

In the run up to the protests the legal team distributed thousands of bust cards with a solicitor's phone number and legal briefings to prepare people for the possible consequences of protesting. It appears though that many of the people who were arrested near the Ashtown Gate were new to politics and had never taken part in anything confrontational and did not have this information. This meant many of those arrested were processed without knowing what was likely to happen to them or whether they could expect support. This was further complicated by the fact that the Gardai refused to allow the arrestees to make their phone call until Sunday, which slowed down the response of the legal support group. Nonetheless, they were nearly all contacted one way or another over the weekend. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the media furore about the riot, the vast majority of defendants contacted opted not get involved in a defendant support group or accept any help from DGN. For those who did opt to accept our solidarity money was and is continuing to be raised but there is no May Day defendants group to speak of.

Two of the English anarchists arrested did ask DGN for solidarity but were unhappy with the level of support they received. DGN's lack of organisational coherence is part of this story because, despite some individuals' best efforts on this score, we failed to make defendant support a collective priority. Some of this is a question of experience but for something as important as legal support this is not acceptable and this aspect of the May Day experience begs political as well as organisational questions.

3. DGN's failings as an organisational model

These problems were not just oversights, they are serious political problems. We need to develop sustainable legal support structures within the libertarian movement but there are a number of obstacles to this, not least the organisational form of DGN. One of the fundamental strengths of the DGN network model is that it is easy to get involved, have a say, work on a given issue and then, if you choose, take a break. This is very attractive in certain respects but as the network is primarily a network of individuals, rather than groups, it can lack organisational coherence and consistency. This is compounded by the fact that many of the people in DGN have only been working with each other for a relatively short period and the informal patterns of cooperation and interdependence that might compensate for such organisational weaknesses haven't fully developed yet. This has meant that problems and issues can present themselves at a time when DGN is not meeting very regularly or at all and often nobody takes up the slack. This is in contrast with more established anti-capitalist networks elsewhere, which consist mainly of groups that have had a longer experience of working with each other.

Potentially, this could create other problems: not least unclear decision-making, the development of informal hierarchies, and a lack of accountability. It also seems as if the structure of DGN makes it impossible to plan political activity in a paced and strategic manner. For instance, after May Day many activists felt completely burnt out during a period which saw an anti-immigrant referendum and Bush's visit to Ireland and this definitely hampered the libertarian campaigns in response to these two events. Politically, such an unstable network is also very unlikely to build the sustained links with communities and workplaces that could make anti-capitalism a

genuinely subversive force. It is not clear at the time of writing whether DGN has a future or not in its current form but hopefully these very serious failings will be addressed by the anti-authoritarian community in the future.

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