

Where to Now? Anti-capitalist protest — global and local

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Debate on the effectiveness of the Black Bloc tactic could well go on forever. At the end of the day, in relation to the question of why its effectiveness has waned somewhat, it is probably true to say that both the original article by Ray Cunningham and the article in this magazine by Severino have some of the answers.

What is not in dispute is the fact that the big ‘set-piece’ anti-capitalist/ anti-globalisation demonstrations appear to be becoming less effective and attracting less media coverage than earlier demos such as Seattle, Prague and Genoa.

June 2002 saw one of these demonstrations – against the EU summit in Seville, Spain. A general strike across the Spanish state on Thursday 20th June was a resounding success. Posters, graffiti and banners advertised the general strike in all the major towns and cities. Even on the tourist coast most shops and restaurants closed. Large demonstrations of 100,000 and more took place in many Spanish cities, with the Seville demo attracting up to 100,000 participants including a sizeable red and black contingent. Union figures estimated support for the strike at 84%. All of the Spanish trade unions, including the big reformist unions – the UGT which is linked to the Socialist Party and the Communist Party dominated CCOO – put a huge effort into building for the general strike.

The June EU summit planned to set up a Europe-wide anti-immigrant police force – another brick in the wall of Fortress Europe. It further aimed to continue the project of building Europe for the bosses, a Europe where workers will be forced to compete in the ‘race for the bottom’ and where power will be more and more centralised. An additional item on the agenda of specific interest to Irish workers was to find ways to force Irish voters to vote yes to the Nice treaty, which had been rejected in a first referendum twelve months previously.

Damp squib

Up to 100,000 people turned out in Seville on Saturday 22nd June to demonstrate their opposition to this agenda and to further globalisation of capital. Despite the size of the demonstration however it turned out to be something of a damp squib, having been planned from the start as entirely non-confrontational (the demo actually taking place after the summit had concluded, thus ruling out any possibility of a blockade). This was mainly due to the fact that the protest was principally organised by the Socialist Party who are actually in government in the Andalucia region of Spain, although they are in opposition in Spain. From the start, the Socialist Party made it clear that confrontation and direct action – in reality anything which would make the demos effective – had no place in their plans.

If you were to rely on the Irish media for your information you would be forgiven for thinking that the Seville demonstration never actually happened. (Indeed the demonstrations which had taken place in Barcelona in March and had attracted an estimated 500,000 participants received just as little coverage in the mainstream media.) In fact you could have been a delegate to the EU summit in Seville and remained unaware that any protests took place. It was surely a testament to their ineffectiveness that they passed by relatively unnoticed outside of Seville.

Without doubt the reason for this lack of coverage was the absence of any form of direct action on the protests and the fact that they seemed to have reverted to the old-style stage-managed protests of pre-Seattle days. The staging of the main demonstration after the EU summit had already concluded showed that the organisers were actually going out of their way to ensure that

direct action aimed at blockading the summit or at least making life slightly less comfortable for the delegates, did not happen. While the protests can be said to have had a degree of success in that the vast majority of participants were members of the local working-class, the ritualistic nonsense of staging demonstrations so far from the summit venue makes it all seem something of a waste of time.

Serious questions

The fact that the protests 21 months earlier in Prague (against the World Bank meeting, September 2000) had attracted less than 20% of the numbers who protested in Seville and yet received far more coverage — and led to much more debate in Ireland and elsewhere — raises serious questions for the movement. For us in Ireland, these questions must be answered in the context of preparing for the EU summit due to take place here in 2004. In this regard, the domination of the protest organisation in Seville by reformists is a major problem (the effects of this are adequately dealt with in Severino's article, even though it was written before Seville).

It is certainly hard to avoid the conclusion that anti-globalisation protests that avoid direct action will kill off the movement, or at least greatly reduce participation in it. The severity of the state repression that took place at the Genoa protests in 2001 succeeded in pushing large sections of the movement onto the defensive, from the NGOs to the Trotskyists. After Genoa, many of these groups dedicated acres of newsprint to not alone distancing themselves from but also directly attacking 'direct action' protestors from the Black Bloc to the White Overalls. Since Genoa — both as a result of increased state repression and as a result of these reformists 'taking over' the organisation of protests — the protests that have taken place have adopted a passive, nonconfrontational tone. The result has been that protests such as those in Brussels and Seville have seemed to be merely token.

Direct Action

This is not to say that all that is needed is for every protest to adopt Black Bloc or White Overall tactics. Indeed Genoa also demonstrated that these tactics were no answer to the increased militarised violence of the state. The Black Bloc's isolation from the rest of the protestors in Genoa meant that in the aftermath many protestors fell for the slander that it was entirely a state creation intended to provide an excuse for the repression. This despite the fact that the Italian police were to admit that they had infiltrated every section of the demonstrators. Whether Ray Cunningham's article in R&BR6 or Severino's in this magazine has the correct analysis of why the Black Bloc was so isolated in Genoa — or whether, as I suggested earlier, each of them has part of the reason — is only important in so far as it helps us to answer a much more important question: how do we win large numbers of people away from the non-confrontational line of the Trotskyists and the reformists? And in the first instance, how do we win working-class people who are not currently part of the movement over to becoming part of the anti-capitalist struggle?

The one lesson that can certainly be learnt from the success of the anticapitalist demos to date has been that it is possible to involve 'ordinary' working class people in coming out to participate in them. It can certainly be argued that the principal thing which has brought people out to demonstrate has been the feeling that the demos have been effective, that they have involved a

degree of confrontation and direct action. Perhaps more importantly, the fact that they haven't involved ritualistic wandering up and down through city streets has given people a reason for taking part. Compare these two figures, for example: in 1996, protests against the G7 Conference in Lyons were attended by about 5,000 people, 4,000 of whom were anarchists. In March 2002, 500,000 people — a very large majority of whom were ordinary working class people from the city itself — protested against the EU summit in Barcelona. This surely proves that the anticapitalist movement has begun to attract huge numbers of ordinary working class people. The principal reason why it has done so can be put down to the change of tactics which emerged in Seattle and Prague — direct action/confrontation has given people a feeling of power and a belief that there is a reason for protesting.

The lesson of this is that if the protests revert to ritualistic walking up and down, if they are seen to be something of a waste of time, a lot of these people are likely to stay at home. The challenge therefore is to find a way to keep people involved, to find a way in which the tactics used are seen to be effective and therefore attract the maximum number of people to participate in whatever protests are held. Furthermore, it is necessary to look for ways to establish structures which will allow for maximum participation in discussions as to what these tactics should be.

In this context, it is clear that the most successful aspects of demonstrations to date have been the use of direct action as in Seattle and the breaking up of demonstrations into different zones as happened in Prague and Quebec. This allowed people to participate at the level with which they themselves felt comfortable — be that direct confrontation, passive resistance, or participation in a totally nonconfrontational way. This is what we must look to replicate in future demonstrations if they are to be effective. As we in Ireland look towards the EU summit here in 2004,¹ this is our challenge.

In addition any protests organised here must have a definite focus and an immediate aim or achievable objective. This might be to blockade the summit venue, the delegates' hotels, their route from the airport or whatever. In other words, something should be done to disrupt the event in some way or at least make life more difficult for those attending it.

Meaningful and Relevant

The breaking down of the isolation between 'the movement' and 'the people' will require us to use all our abilities to communicate our ideas, and to make these ideas meaningful and relevant to working-class people's day-to-day lives and struggles. It means explaining clearly and precisely the links between refuse charges, privatisation, pollution in the form of incinerators and the agenda of the EU bosses, for example. It means exposing the hypocrisy of a system that wishes to dismantle all borders to the flow of money, capital and business while at the same time making it ever more difficult for people fleeing poverty and injustice to gain entry to the 'developed world'.

What is needed is that the anti-capitalist movement takes seriously the slogan 'Think Global, Act Local'. The tens of thousands of people refusing to pay the double tax refuse charges can — if the arguments are properly made — form the backbone of the anti-capitalist movement. When the Euro Summit circus comes to Dublin in 2004, these should be the people prominent in the protests. The organisation for this must start now. The focus of that organisation must be on

¹ It now seems that this summit will not take place in Ireland, the points made still hold true in general terms however

using the opportunity to build a mass self-organised anti-capitalist movement as well as getting the numbers out on the actual protests.

From the outset there must be open and frank discussion and debate about the type and form of protests which will be organised. Anarchists and libertarians should argue against the 'one size fits all' model being pushed by the Trotskyists and reformists, and which would amount to little more than a parade up and down O'Connell Street. Instead, as happened in Quebec and Prague, there should be space created for a diversity of tactics with people being able to choose an area that meets their need.

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