

Some Notes Concerning Future Proletarian Insurgency

Red Robbie

November 2000

Part One: The Dynamics of "Protest" Seen in the Recent Petrol Blockades in Britain

Below are some brief notes regarding the recent petrol blockades in Britain (September and November 2000). What hooks our attention in these events is not the "consciousness" of the protesters, whether the protesters were "reactionary" or "petty bourgeois/middle class", but the dynamic of the struggle; the truisms it laid bare; the potential for utilising some of the tactics employed, and lessons that might be learned, in the future struggles of wage labour.

September 2000, an outbreak of effective popular spontaneity occurs, i.e., a non-formal organisation takes the State unawares, the police back off, approaches are made to identify leaders so as to enter into a condition of negotiation and thus out of crisis.

The size of public support takes everyone by surprise. The left condemn the fuel protesters as fascists because the protesters reveal no apparent ideological consciousness, and are often petit bourgeois/middle class, even being employers themselves.

Many people comment on the pleasurable quietness of the world, people start talking to each other — the privations generate a sense of pleasurable solidarity. "Social dislocation" is not as unpleasant as the media try to make us believe.

Objectively, the blockades bite very quickly into the reserves of the 'Just in Time' economy — the State seems paralysed, unable to strike out in all directions at once, its counter insurgency measures appear to simply rely on information gathering. But as there is no intelligence (i.e., there is no overt, formal leadership as yet: everyone is involved), it sits and does nothing.

Protesters call off the blockades, formalise a pressure group, set timescales and make demands.

A propaganda offensive is begun by the State particularly through progressive and green journalists.

Leaders are identified and very quickly are divided into moderates and extremists, debates are set up between them, on Channel Four News etc., in order to establish rivalries.

The formalisation of the protesters organisation places it within the State's discourse. What matters now is not the statement of feral power on the roads but of having opened up a direct route of negotiation with the State (a Trojan horse in reverse, the State allowed such an opportunity precisely because it could neutralise that kind of organisation).

When it was publicly perceived that this was not a peasants revolt but just a bunch of petty capitalists trying to get a little bit extra then public support very quickly dwindled. What they had liked was the “aggro”, the sight of workers confidently taking on the state, when that proved to be not really the case, they lost interest, “the public” has no interest in issues (consciousness) only in power and counter power.

Of course the enticement of negotiation was a lie, the state will exact a revenge on the individuals involved. Melville writes in *Billy Budd* of a system of power whereby the ship’s master-at-arms has means at his disposal for punishing individuals who may not have broken any rules but have become subversive of the ship’s spirit. It is described as being down on you, Billy Budd finds that he encounters all sorts of inexplicable bad things happening to him, petty things but annoying all the same. And all the while the master-at-arms, who orchestrates Budd’s perplexity, smiles at him.

The build up to the proposed actions planned for November are portrayed in the media as indecisive, weak and confused. The protesters, in a classic tactical error, but under immense pressure and no doubt destabilisation strategies, decide in favour of adopting a policy of gaining State recognition (and respectability) and forget the blockading lessons of their earlier efforts. One ‘leader’ publicly declares that if any unruly drivers picket a fuel depot he will personally go to them and demand they stop. There has developed within the drivers leadership an aversion to the tactic of the blockades, a vertigo at the prospect of so much instant power, a terror of what they have done.

In general terms we should see this stage not so much as a crisis of consciousness but a forgetting of the nature of power in the rush to be heard and to be accepted by the State. The impulse to act within the law, to appear respectable and within the pale is very strong — most protest groups see the adoption of a rational, media acceptable face as the only way of getting things done. But the public were not interested in the ‘issue’ what they admired was the actualisation of power created by the blockaders, power attracts support — from this we can infer that a large section of the populace will become pro-revolutionary almost immediately in any similar crisis initiated by a proper working class intervention, and they will do so not because of the issue at hand but because they sense their direct access to power.

Police anti-convoy tactics. Splitting up convoys, individual harassment, setting routes and no-go zones (firstly they just want to negotiate, open up channels, they then use these ‘channels’ as a means for dictating terms to the protesters). Changing of plans, abandoning agreements without notice. Provocation and intimidation, including videoing (in one incident a driver demanded that a TV camera crew observe the blatant police surveillance he was suffering, the camera didn’t move). Given that the September blockades had conveyed a sense of power, solidarity and strength, the harmonised work of the police and media was now to generate images and actions of weakness and division. We saw hysterical, frustrated drivers, the derisory ‘convoy’ of a few lorries and the protesters represented (as are all non-establishment political entities) as a minority divided from the normal and neutral population as a whole.

The informational forces of the State had, by November, plenty of time to gear up, the State shepherded the ‘convoy’ down to London like it was driving sheep for market day. The despair of the drivers in the convoy became apparent as they realised they’d been had. “Now it’s gloves off,” snarled one of them to the TV news, impotently. The lorry drivers suddenly became another squealing TV protest group like the Greenham Women. The shrillness of tone in itself indicates powerlessness and interrupts any potential solidarity or support.

It seems therefore that making demands on the back of popular revolt is automatically a disaster because revolt cannot be called back, also it cannot be called for in advance, there is an alchemy to it, a mystery, it just happens, it cannot be made into a political entity. The Situationists had it right: the only call to revolt is to say to it, "Call that a revolt, that's nothing! Take courage you pussyfooters, one more step." Revolt is a blind bull feeling for a way out of the field and into a different arena, what it lacks is not consciousness but tools that are applicable to the job.

It seems the move to symbolic action (as opposed to real action) is a disaster and everyone who had previously pricked up their ears lost interest.

Local negotiation with the police is a disaster as they will use any agreement as a lever.

Announcing in advance what you are going to do is a disaster because the State will stop you, there should always be alternatives and contingencies including absolute silence and doing nothing.

What we have learnt:

When revolts of this nature occur we tend to begin to speculate about ways that we (as radicals) might have related to such an event, or how we might relate to a similar one in the future, especially if the revolt in question had a proletarian character. We can see how the methods used in this revolt might be taken up by proletarian insurgents; therefore it is useful to think about how we might react to such future possibilities.

The petrol blockades show the apparent importance of using "anti-informational techniques". Most (repressive, dividing, and controlling) State activity works by identifying individuals and relating them through organisational structures, all membership organisations, therefore, are built with flaws present from the outset which the State is able to exploit, usually to the detriment of the whole "movement". (Look at the film, *The Battle of Algiers*.)

In general terms spontaneity is one anti-informational technique, another is the absence of significant individuals. In particular (as radicals who desire the overthrow of capitalism), we can also draw the lesson that "the revolution" is not the ("revolutionary") organisations' preserve. Still another anti-informational stance is group openness, explicitness and coherence (not openness to the State but to comrades: no fronts; no issues; no hidden agendas). Nothing can be found out that is not hidden. Structurally, genuinely radical "political" groups will never be more than pro-revolutionary, so if they are neutralised then it will make no decisive difference because the action is going on elsewhere (this is only a rationalisation of what is already true). The role of organised groups is very specific, they are not a vanguard but can have a decisive role, they are never revolutionary, they are pro-revolutionary and as such can bring things as a kind of service provider to workers engaged in direct struggle. Therefore, in a similar situation to the fuel blockades, the pro-revolutionary group will agitate to clarify what is going on, to maintain the situation, to further the sense of power and progress by interventions on small 'second fronts' (in their localities or at work, for example), to provide communication and information. When nothing is happening these organisations should do nothing more than maintain networks at a minimal level.

The most important lesson of the blockades, and their subsequent translation into symbolic protest, is to do nothing unless you have the power to do it successfully (give the State no chance to practice its techniques) and then do nothing that feels like a retreat or a crossing over into a terrain described by the State (i.e. don't let them set the terms, it would have been better if the fuel protesters had done nothing after September, that way the threat would have remained).

What is certain is that most of the radical movement will instantly pass over onto the terrain of the State in the event of any crisis but this may be just a short term thing (most of the left supported both the action of the State against the blockaders and the bombing of Serbia) when they have regained their nerve they may return to their radical democratic (and thus, still anti-proletarian) positions. It is quite plain that these radicals are a miserable shower.

Red Robbie, Proletarian Gob, Nov. 2000.

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