

Troublemakers 1 (February 2024)

A Sheffield Action Group (SHAG) publication

Sheffield Action Group

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We are SHAG (Sheffield Action Group): Sheffield's queer youth-led direct action collective. From rent strikes to blockades and occupations, our activists have been making trouble at Sheffield universities and further afield for over three years now. We thought it was about time we shared some of what we've been up to, so welcome to our first TROUBLEMAKERS zine! The articles within are written by individuals from the collective. This zine introduces our politics and provides some practical advice alongside reflections on recent actions and projects over the last few years.

What is Liberation?

We believe in liberation politics as a guiding political philosophy. Our understanding of liberation is the idea of total liberation, meaning all our struggles are connected and we cannot achieve liberation for some without liberation for others. We are only as free as the most oppressed in our society. In the words of Maya Angelou: “The truth is, no one of us can be free until everybody is free.”

You cannot fight ecological destruction of our planet without fighting capitalism which supports it; if we want a society free of queerphobia we must smash patriarchy and racism too – otherwise we only privilege white gay men. It is only from the destruction of the roots of oppression that we can open up space to enable freedom for community and ecological flourishing.

We must learn from liberation movements that have gone before by recognising that we cannot see our youth, queer, Earth and other liberation struggles realised without also fighting for total liberation across our society.

Our movements build towards liberation from all forms of oppression to see success. This is not to say that our actions will achieve total liberation tomorrow, but that it must be seen as the basis for our long term political projects.

Abolition

“Abolitionist politics is not about what is possible, but about making the impossible a reality. Ending slavery appeared to be an impossible challenge for Sojourner Truth, Denmark Vesey, Nat Turner, John Brown, Harriet Tubman, and others, and yet they struggled for it anyway. Today we seek to abolish a number of seemingly immortal institutions, drawing inspiration from those who have sought the abolition of all systems of domination, exploitation, and oppression—from Jim Crow laws and prisons to patriarchy and capitalism.” — ‘Manifesto for Abolition’ in *Abolition: A Journal of Insurgent Politics*

Our politics are those of total liberation, and we see abolition as an essential means to achieve these ends. Abolition seeks the wholesale destruction of the Police, Prisons, Psychiatry, and all other systems of state violence. We have seen time and again that reform is ineffective as these systems are designed from the top down to oppress. Our position is one of radical hope, that we can make the seemingly impossible possible; that the systems of domination and oppression are not untouchable. We must be unyielding in our demands and action to tear it all down. Brick by brick they will all fall.

The more liberal NGO activists will decry the violence of borders or stand up against the injustice of incarceration, but they don’t call for abolition. Reform! Compromise! “Let’s make Police 20% less violent, prisons with 10% fewer suicides, or carbon neutral guided missiles.” Reform doesn’t seek to end our oppression but rather soften the blows. There is no liberation to be found in compromise. Queer Liberation, Black Liberation, or even Earth Liberation cannot be achieved without abolition. We cannot simply allow for our oppression to be reformed, rebranded, and then left to continue. We can only see our own liberation in the total abolition of all systems of oppression.

ACAB

In case the last few pages haven’t made it clear, we stand in complete opposition to the pigs occupying the streets of Britain — the violent gang we know as ‘His Majesty’s Constabulary’.

We must remember and reaffirm that the primary service the police provide is the protection of the state, capital and property. This role includes the repression of revolutionary thought and practice. One of the most pernicious examples of this in the UK has been the Spy-Cops scandal, where as early as 1968 we saw officers of the ‘Special Demonstration Squad’ infiltrate left-wing and anti-establishment political groups, even if the group might be ‘completely harmless’.

Meanwhile, the Met police chiefs decided not to infiltrate far-right groups despite sustained racially aggravated attacks on minority communities. The question we are left with is, “why?” and the answer is clear. The far-right pose no threat to the police and instead serves as a natural ally. Often the far right thug on the street is an off-duty officer.

The police will always work against our activities. For this, we cannot afford to see the police as many currently do as an impartial third party to operate around, but instead as the strong arm of the state which must be resisted if we have any hope of victory.

International Day of Solidarity with anarchist prisoners — June 11th

We stand in solidarity with anarchist prisoners around the world, including Lina E (a German anti-fascist) who, in the summer of 2023, was handed prison sentences for her resistance to Neo-Nazi networks in Leipzig. In the UK we are seeing a massive increase in political incarceration as a political weapon to suppress resistance. Whether that is the criminalization of self-defence in Bristol with Kill the Bill prisoners, or the increased incarceration of anti-arms trade and climate justice groups. We must resist this change and resist the prison industrial complex at large. While not all prisoners are political prisoners, all prisoners and all prisons are political. Our solidarity extends to all locked up under this brutal system.

What is School?

As students at university, we have a lot more to say about the global and national role of our institutions – this will come at another point. For now we will focus on primary and secondary school. Many reading this will have left 13 years of schooling, likely hating most of it, and may not have thought a lot about the scale of its impact on our lives and how things could have been so, so different.

School is a class stratifier along eugenic lines. Those deemed more intelligent by their ability to absorb and spit out information in tests are seen as more suited for higher paying jobs and therefore, by this society's logic, 'deserve' more. This creates a system that differentially exposes those who emerge from it to death and precarity as, if someone is unable to do well in an exam they are less likely to get a high-paying job and therefore more likely to experience difficulty paying for rent, fuel, and food. This is what educator Paulo Freire calls banking education. An education where students are seen as banks to be filled with knowledge in lessons, which is spat back out in tests, and where their ability to do this determines their worth in the job market (or whether they get to have a job at all). For Freire, a liberating education is one which flattens the hierarchy between student and teacher and allows both parties to become conscious of the world around them and to learn together how to change it.

Within modern schooling are two curricula: the overt and the covert. The overt is the content of lessons, the miseducation of history, the overfocus on STEM, and the same canon taught over and over again. This functions to shape the scope of approved knowledge and brings about ideological conformity to bourgeois ways of knowing the world. The covert curriculum is all about control. From needing to ask to go for toilet breaks, to gendered school uniforms, to having to be quiet in lessons, to timetables, to school rules, to "British Values", to the constant "yes sir, yes madam" and so on and so forth. We were taught to obey, to be efficient Fordist workers, to show up on time and to not step outside the box unless you want to spend a day in silence in isolation writing lines. School bells were introduced to get children used to working in factories. The covert curriculum is the gendering and racializing aspect of schooling, the aspect which encourages us to reproduce the nuclear family, racial hierarchy, and the world of work.

People who function better within the schooling system are those who are most likely to be best at reproducing the current system. They have learned to take orders, passively and uncritically absorb and spit out information, and have caused few problems for their teachers. All of which serve to crush and assimilate the revolutionary spirit of youth.

Schooling sits alongside the state and the family as a tool that brings youth into the logic of patriarchy. School teaches an ideology of the ruling class in the form of reified histories, narrowed sciences and the western canon. School is also a gendering machine where gendered uniforms, gendered bathrooms and patriarchal learning environments naturalise the domination of feminised people through this essentialism. School is the convening point where the state and family enacts upon the youth. The superiority of the teacher and of domination within the family means that youth cannot escape attempts to inculcate us into systems of domination and oppression.

The conformity brought about by schools is a tool of colonisation and bringing about global hegemony. Starting off as Christian missionary schools — with the last only closing in 2007 — indigenous boarding schools (for example in the US) stole children from their families and sought to “Kill the Indian in him, and save the man”. These words by Captain Richard Henry Pratt speak clearly of the purpose of these schools — cultural cleansing. Pratt founded the first of these schools and his model and curriculum was then rolled out as a national system. This is a conscious recognition of schooling’s function of assimilating cultures into western modes of thinking, into producing western subjects. If you can change what and how children think, you change how they act and you change the future and shape the direction of society.

In so-called Canada, over the last few years, thousands of bodies have been found on the grounds of these schools. Children were not just banned from speaking their own languages and practicing their own cultures, they were murdered as part of the ongoing genocide at the heart of settler-colonial states like the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. From this we can clearly see why the UN, global business, the IMF and World Bank care so much about educating every child. They seek to proletarianise the world, to crush cultural difference and to quash the potential for global uprising.

We need an education based in community, where we can learn about the land around us, learn from local flora and fauna just as we learn from each other. Where the application of our knowledge is the focus of our efforts and where remaking and learning become synonymous. This education cannot be reserved only for younger generations but has to span across society such that we all become teachers and all become students.

We seek the abolition of all schools, the freeing of all children and the reintroduction of play into everyday life. We seek the opening of new youth centres, new forms of educational institution, and the freeing of all human potential. The route towards this future doesn’t sit with government education policy or radical university departments — it sits with us and the expansion of autonomous youth space.

“Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity, or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.” — Paulo Friere

“When education is not liberating, the dream of the oppressed is to become the oppressor.” — Also Paulo Friere

Direct Action Gets the Goods

The development of Direct Action has been the biggest contribution of Anarchists to politics. The late David Graeber defined it as “the defiant insistence on acting as if one is already free.” In Direct Action, we aim to achieve our goals through our own activity rather than the actions of others. It is distinguished from most other forms of political action such as voting, lobbying, and attempting to exert political pressure through the media or your average labour strike. All these activities operate on the falsehood that we are incapable of change and must work through third parties. They concede our power to existing institutions that work to prevent us from acting ourselves to change the status quo.

Direct Action is inescapably revolutionary in nature; through our actions we create and pre-figure the world we want to see, bringing forth a new world in the ashes of the old, and through that, inspiring others to do the same – a propaganda of the deed. Any situation where people organise to extend control over their own circumstances without recourse to capital or state is Direct Action. “Doing it ourselves” is the essence of Direct Action, whether we are resisting injustice or creating a better world here and now by organising to meet our needs. Instead of making demands of the government or university leadership and appealing to their conscience, we simply do it. If there is a weapons factory to be shut down, then shut it down! If unwelcome guests are invited on campus for a talk, then stop them!

Some examples of Direct Action include blockades, pickets, sabotage, squatting, tree spiking, lockouts, occupations, slowdowns and the revolutionary general strike. In the community, it involves, amongst other things, establishing organisations such as food and housing mutual aid networks and community centres to provide for our social needs, blocking industrial expansion that pollutes our communities, and taking back the houses that we need to live in through squats. Direct Action embodies our will and ingenuity to stand between the wild and those who would destroy it. We act to undermine the profits of the organisations that direct the exploitation of nature against those organisations themselves. In industry and the workplace, Direct Action aims either to extend workers’ control or to directly attack the profits of the employers.

Whilst most strikes are not direct action, if your average striking worker were, however, to occupy their factory, sabotage machinery or strike as part of a revolutionary general strike, this would be Direct Action. As a strike is mediated through the union, the worker may find their union dissatisfied with them taking direct action and not playing by the ‘rules’. The institutions that are supposed to protect us such as student unions can remain impartial to protect their funding streams rather than support students being attacked for daring to demand a better world. Direct Action repudiates such acceptance of the existing order and suggests that we have both the right and the power to change the world.

One of the most important aspects of Direct Action is the organisation involved in order for it to be successful. By organising to achieve our goals ourselves, we learn valuable skills and discover that organisation without hierarchy is possible. Where it succeeds, Direct Action shows that people can control their own lives and a stateless society is possible. Direct Action and

Anarchist organisation are in fact two sides of the same coin. When we demonstrate the success of one we demonstrate the reality of the other.

Note: Direct Action and Protest

Direct Action is fundamentally separate from symbolic protest such as banner drops or publicity stunts. Direct Action doesn't try to voice concern or resentment, but to instead actively exercise power and control over the situation. This isn't to say protests and symbolic actions are without merit but to recognise that protests demanding state or corporate reform are begging our oppressors to support changes contrary to their interests. However, these symbolic protests that demand change are seemingly the most popular direction on the UK left. We must challenge this conception and use our actions to provide others with an example of how they can reclaim their power — and not just protest — for collective liberation.

Security

Keeping you and your comrades safe

If you have read this zine and agree with its ideas then we have some bad news: you are now an “aggravated activist” and an enemy of the UK government! The government want to shut down abolitionist and direct action movements. They will use the police, GCHQ and MI5 to track down you and your comrades; but don’t worry, we have some advice to keep you safe(r).

The first thing to think about before any tech or systems is group culture. Those most likely to become informants (deliberately or even accidentally) are often those in the most vulnerable positions but this doesn’t mean we shouldn’t work with them. Instead, we combat this by building structures that prevent isolation. Security isn’t just technical skills; it is about building trust and creating cultures of care within your group.

Building from this, if you are worried about infiltration from the government, opposition groups, or private investigators, focus on confronting bad behaviour. Regardless of whether someone is an informant, if there is a group member continuously disrupting your ability to campaign and function – behaving in a sexist way, lying, constantly gossiping about other group members, rarely following decision-making protocol, you should ask this individual to stop, and, if they don’t, consider putting boundaries in place or asking them to leave your group.

Consider recruitment strategies. Open meetings are great for building numbers quickly but their open nature comes with higher risks. Some groups of people only work with individuals they know and trust. Others use a vouched-for-by-a-trusted member system. You can go even stricter with systems such as staged recruitment, with both visible and invisible organising spaces. However, these strategies can make groups exclusionary and lead to a false sense of security. Remember to pick your style based on your aims, but no matter if you are fully open or tightly closed be sure to apply this decision consistently.

Now it’s time to keep quiet. Careless talk leaves comrades at risk of repression from both state and non-state actors. This means not talking, joking, or boasting about sensitive things you (and especially others) have done or might do in the future. Keep it on a need-to-know basis (that includes partners, family and other activists).

A few practical tips and tricks

On the streets

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Mask up and cover your face. — Recent Bristol Kill the Bill defendants were identified by police because their faces appeared on CCTV, so covering it up is essential. This has also been seen in the university environment, with security using CCTV after actions to identify students.
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Use an alias — Don't use your real name. Once police find a name, tracking you down becomes much easier.

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No Comment — **You do not need to answer police questions, so don't. This is for your protection and the protection of others. The police will try to pressure and deceive you into incriminating yourself. Instead of trying to decide when it seems 'safe' to answer, just say "No comment" to all questions – during 'informal chats', in the police van, and especially in interviews.**

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No Personal Details — You do not have to give personal details under ANY stop and search power, so don't. On protests, the police often use searches as a way of finding out who is present, both for intelligence purposes and to intimidate you.

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Under What Power? — Police rely on you not knowing the law. If you are asked to do something by a police officer, ask them "under what power?" (i.e. what law) are they using and why they are using it. They need a power to ask you to do something (not that the police always follow the law.) Make a note of what was said, and by whom (shoulder numbers) as soon as possible afterwards.

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More info — If you have any legal questions relating to protest then visit greenandblackcross.org, or ring the 24/7 protest support line on 07946 541511. GBC is an independent grass-roots group which provides legal support and information to lefty protesters in England and Wales. This summary was brief; attend a Know Your Rights workshop to learn more.

Tech

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Keep it real — as soon as a piece of information enters your tech, you are at risk. The safest thing to do is organise in real life without technology present, but what if that's not always possible or practical for your group?

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Messaging systems — if you have to use tech, use it properly. When messaging, use open source end-to-end encrypted messaging apps such as Signal or Session. For email, use an encrypted platform such as Proton Mail, however, note that if the recipient is not on an encrypted platform that email won't be fully secure.

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Storage — CryptPad & RiseUp provides easy alternatives to Google or Microsoft.

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Devices — keep phones updated where possible. On computers install drive encryption — popular options are BitLocker and VeraCrypt.

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Phones — make sure to get an updated device that has encryption. If you are concerned about your mobile security consider using a platform such as GrapheneOS or CalyxOS. Remember, end-to-end encrypted messaging doesn't matter if the ends (your devices) aren't encrypted and they get seized!

- Wipe your devices — don't keep old action plans or photos and regularly wipe your phones and computers' deleted files. If a file is only deleted and not wiped then that data is recoverable.
- Don't google it — your search history and website visits can be viewed by law enforcement.
- Secure browser — don't use Chrome! Use secure browsers like Brave or Firefox.
- Use a secure search engine — Duck Duck Go is an easy switch you can make.
- Use a VPN — at minimum use a secure open-source VPN such as Mullvad VPN. This masks your IP address and hides your online activity from your ISP, although doesn't make it untraceable.
- TOR — if you are seriously worried about state surveillance, TOR is the most secure platform for accessing the internet and is free to use.
With the information provided, we would like to remind you that using it comes with a trade-off. Your movement becomes more secretive and less accessible for new people to join. This might actually be exactly what your oppressors want you to do: this is a threat for you to assess based on your threat models and local context. This is only a short intro and we encourage you to look beyond this zine for more information.

Affinity group and practical support on demonstrations

Note: We felt the need to include this article after the events on March 18th 2023 at an antifascist demonstration near Rotherham. A report on this can also be found later in this zine.

Solidarity is a verb. It is not just there to be thrown around by droning speakers at TUC demos. 'Solidarity comrades' means standing shoulder to shoulder when police try to pick off protesters, it means refusing to sell out those around you to the police, even if you disagree with their tactics.

On a demonstration, police are looking to locate and arrest "troublemakers" to intimidate and pacify the crowd. People may be seen as "trouble" just for chanting a bit too passionately or simply for flying a flag deemed a bit too radical for their liking. This requires us to be sharp and on the lookout for each other. We cannot let them pick us off one by one. When we shout "solidarity" and "Whose streets? Our streets!" we need to mean it and be prepared to act together to defend each other from police attacks. **We cannot be isolated individuals, we must stand together.**

What is an Affinity Group?

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A small, leaderless group of comrades, who plan together, work together and support each other. This term takes on different meanings in different contexts; this leaflet is about working together at demonstrations.

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Although the term was first coined by anarchists in the Spanish Civil War, affinity groups have been used effectively in political actions and protests throughout history and are a core practice in many social, ecological and revolutionary movements.

Why are they Important?

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With the non-stop energetic pace of protesting, it is easy for demo fatigue to creep in and things to become a bit routine and less effective.

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We need to carry on causing maximum disruption and trouble for the government and their plans for escalating police powers & social control.

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The cops are well prepared and ready to do the dirty work of cracking heads, terrorising protesters and neutralising our actions & movements.

- It is no longer enough to just turn up on your own at a demo and see how it goes!

Acting Effectively Together

- Discuss your aims, find common ground and build trust.
- Agree on some shared approaches, aims and boundaries, and only do what everyone in the group is comfortable getting involved with.
- Check in with each other regularly sharing your thoughts and concerns as you go. Learn from each other and communicate well together.
- Share tasks, skills and responsibilities amongst the team (e.g. someone to bring extra water for pepper sprayed eyes).
- Have a pre-agreed word to call out to regroup and stick together.
- Keep each other safe and be ready to defend each other in potentially hazardous situations.
- Buddy up! Always look out for your buddy.

Arms Off Campus: two years of action

Over the last two academic years, we have launched a full frontal assault on the University of Sheffield and Sheffield Hallam's links to the arms trade. But before we go into our actions and resistance to this we must first give some context.

The University of Sheffield has the highest funding from arms manufacturers of any UK university, having received £72 million from arms companies since 2012 according to recent freedom of information requests. With Rolls Royce, Boeing, BAE Systems, GKN, Caterpillar, Airbus, General Electric Aviation, and QinetiQ, alongside grants from the United States Military and the UK Ministry of Defence, the University of Sheffield is in bed with war criminals. The Advanced Manufacturing Research Centre (AMRC), part funded by Boeing, is located just outside Sheffield, and is the crown jewel of the University's complicity in the arms trade. Sheffield Hallam is not much better, having industrial partnerships with JCB, Caterpillar, Volvo, Rolls Royce, and BAE Systems amongst others.

BAE Systems have supplied weapons and logistical support to Saudi Arabia before, during, and after their widely condemned bombing campaign in Yemen that has seen 400,000 people killed so far and a further 17 million forced into starvation. A military campaign condemned for war crimes, enabled by British bombs, plans, and logistics. Meanwhile, BAE Systems is considered by both universities in Sheffield as a close research partner. We cannot sit back and say nothing.

It doesn't stop at BAE Systems. Rolls Royce is another example, holding various contracts with Turkey, a country that has been consistently using targeted airstrikes on Kurdish communities in Rojava (North-Eastern Syrian Autonomous region) and in Turkish-occupied Kurdistan. Even more directly, both universities work with the US and UK military apparatus, which provides grants in return for research into more efficient war machines.

Our universities are continuing to enable Western colonialism around the world with little consideration for the harm they are causing. This harm is historical — since the establishment of the British Empire, universities have provided the empire with civil servants, military officers and regional administrators essential in the operation of the empire. And this complicity has never stopped; the current funding from arms companies is just the continuation of the colonial education project. For all the talk of progressive and woke universities, our institutions are fundamentally propping up global inequality and imperialism.

During our campaign, in October 2023, Israeli Occupation Forces launched a new intensification of the genocide of the Palestinian peoples. The British state and British universities work deeply with Israel, and are directly complicit in occupation and genocide — arming the IOF, quashing protest and remaining silent on the root causes of the violence. In light of this, our campaigns since have paid special attention to companies facilitating this genocide, and we have strengthened our ties with other groups fighting for Palestinian Liberation.

Action #1 — March 2022 Sheffield Military Education Committee

We infiltrated the ‘Sheffield Military Education Committee Leader’s Talk’ and got their event cancelled. The event itself was a lecture, panel discussion and networking event between the Military, Business, and Higher Education sectors including the Vice-chancellors of both Sheffield universities signing the military covenant. Not shady at all then...

But what is this Military Education Committee behind the talk? The MEC is a cross-university body that works to recruit students into the military and to establish institutional support within our education for the military and its industrial complex. Upon hearing of this event, we decided to take action and seal the fate of the MEC event; especially as their talks were also crossing the UCU picket lines!

So a small team of activists occupied the lecture theatre where the event was due to take place and unfurled a banner. After just a few minutes of chanting the event was cancelled... how sad!

Action #2 — Oct 2022 Diamond Occupation

At this point we seriously started to piss off the University of Sheffield, with a week-long occupation of the University of Sheffield’s £81m engineering building, The Diamond. This resulted in its closure, making waves and catching the attention of news outlets locally and internationally, with articles in Jacobin as well as The Tab, a host of local publications, Squat.net, the front page of Forge Press — the university newspaper read by students, staff and researchers alike — and a column by us published in local news outlet Now Then. The occupation was only called off after the university went to court and brought in High Court Enforcement Officers (bailiffs) to evict us.

This was a highly successful action that caused massive disruption to the university, forcing it to have many difficult conversations around its close ties to the military-industrial complex and war criminals.

Action #3 — November 2022 Occupation of Hicks

Continuing our demilitarise campaign alongside and in solidarity with the UCU (University and College Union) who were on strike, we began a short occupation of the Uni of Sheffield’s Hicks Building to maintain pressure and demonstrate student support for the strikes. It became tense following security placing chains on the doors, locking us in an enclosed area and illegally removing our ability to leave in an emergency situation.

In one confusing moment a staff member crossed our picket wearing a CND (Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament) pin, as they didn’t support the strike. We would like to remind all fellow peace and anti-arms trade activists that the struggle against the profit-driven military-industrial complex and the struggle against marketised education are inseparable. A fact that can never change in a for-profit system of education!

Action #4 — Nov 2022 Careers fair disrupted

Hot on the back of our occupation of Hicks we shut down one of the university's careers fairs. University of Sheffield's Careers Service is responsible for pushing students into jobs in the military and its industrial complex alongside jobs in the fossil fuel sector. We see this relationship as morally irreconcilable with our university's commitment to be "responsible – for our people and the wider world" as one of its 5 key values.

We went in with our 'Get military out of education' and '#OneOfUsAllOfUs' (a UCU solidarity slogan) banners and took the stage and the mic. We also took the opportunity at this point to highlight the university's relationship with Thales, an arms that has provided UoS with £1.1 million in research funding. Thales in the UK builds the Watchkeeper drone, produced through a joint venture with Israeli arms company Elbit Systems. Thales' products have also been used by the Russian military in Ukraine.

Action #5 — Nov 2022 Cantor occupation

Our campaign continued to roll, with our comrades at Sheffield Hallam launching an occupation of the Cantor Building, reminding Hallam that they are not outside of our field of view. The university also maintains a close relationship with various arms companies.

Since this occupation we have heard Hallam has been engaged in developing technology to automate the EU border... seems like an escalation at Hallam might be needed!

Action #6 — Feb 2023 Operation Octopussy

Thursday 9th and Friday 10th of February 2023 were University and College Union (UCU) strike days. They also happened to be the days that the University of Sheffield was hosting HESPA – the Higher Education Strategic Planners Association, a part of the training and replication of Higher Education's middle management who are responsible for a large part of the running of the sector and contain many of its future leaders. The conference was due to be held in the Octagon, behind a UCU picket line – and Vice-Chancellor Koen Lamberts was billed to be giving the opening address on Thursday morning at 10:30am.

Just before 09:00 on Thursday, a dozen Sheffield Action Groupers (SHAGers, if you will) walked through the front entrance of the Octagon, all dressed in sexy white overalls. The University's Security Operations Manager (and ex-cop), Simon Verrall, was on the doors. He took offence to our presence and began assaulting activists by grabbing and pushing us, with at least one person falling to the ground, in a violent but vain attempt to prevent our entry.

All this as the 20 UCU members who formed the special picket called to protest the event looked on in horror. After his own underling pointed out that he really shouldn't be assaulting students and that he should instead "leave it to security", former firearms commander and Superintendent Verrall of the South Yorkshire Police responded angrily with the admittedly quite funny line, "I AM security", and finally relented. Twelve of us spread across and occupied the building, taking entrances and deploying banners to block conference attendees from entering.

The organisers were taken completely by surprise and, lacking a contingency plan (who could have possibly predicted they would face disruption for bare-facedly crossing a picket line in

Sheffield!), the event was cancelled several hours later. Koen unfortunately never showed up, cowardly cancelling his appearance as soon as the occupation started. Our group goal of megaphoning the slimy bastard will have to wait for another day. Still, at least we ruined Simon's week. Must be getting embarrassing for him, having to keep explaining to his bosses why he can't do his job. We left the occupation at 13:00 and had a lovely photoshoot with some flares and banners in front of a buoyant crowd of striking staff. Up the UCU!

Action #7 — Sept 2023 Crashing Freshers Fair

We know the army preys on the working class, but they also prey on students — recruiting us to be cannon fodder in service of imperialism. They had a stand at a freshers fair, attempting to sign up students before their university education had even begun. With how they'd positioned themselves, it was all too easy to get a banner in place above them and leaflet the crowd below, which they certainly weren't happy about!

Action #8 — Sept 2023 Operation B.A.E. (Before All Else)

To kick off the academic year we occupied the Arts Tower (the tallest university building in England!) for three days over the University of Sheffield's ties with the arms trade, and their attacks on striking workers. With a team of seventeen people inside (plus more outside support) we forced the university to hire expensive private security to monitor our movements 24/7 in an attempt to intimidate us, but we still succeeded in shutting the building's normal operations. They stole our banners, shut off electricity and stopped outside food deliveries (although they failed to realise we could lift food up through the windows). On the final day, they discovered we were in the boardroom (where we'd been since the beginning) and the security operations manager, Simon Verrall, laughably concluded we must have crawled through a non-existent roof space.

Action #9 — Nov 2023 the wave

As a result of the Israeli State's escalation of its genocidal project in Palestine following the events of the 7th October 2023, there was a renewed appetite for action on campus.

The University of Sheffield was holding an opening ceremony for its latest vanity project, a new £99m building. 'The Wave' is supposedly net-zero, but had to be knocked down once due to it literally sinking into the ground. The ceremony had planned speeches from the Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Gill Valentine, as well as champagne and a big cake in the shape of the building.

Unfortunately about 70 students somehow managed to get inside with banners reading 'CUT TIES WITH APARTHEID', 'SOLIDARITY', and 'STOP ARMING ISRAEL'. Some of them had megaphones, and started calling out the University's ties to the arms trade and complicity in the Israeli genocide of Palestinians. For some reason the organisers of the event didn't appreciate the noise, and had to cancel the event.

Action #10 – December 2023 Divorcing Husbands

In the context of the following two pages as well as complicity in the ongoing Palestinian genocide, we decided Chris Husbands, Vice-Chancellor of Sheffield Hallam University did not deserve a leaving party. Hallam has received numerous investments from dodgy companies who support the killing of refugees and the expansion of the carceral state. Under the leadership of Chris Husbands, this has increased.

The day began at 12pm with a demonstration outside Sheffield Hallam University's Owen Building in solidarity with the ongoing genocide of Palestinians in Gaza. We thought it impolite to not pay Chris Husbands a visit at his leaving ceremony being held inside – all students and staff were invited after all, and that includes us. The university was already spooked, with a horde of Security thugs stood guarding the doors to welcome us into the building. A short walk later round the back of the building, and we quickly found the atrium where the event would be held. Our hosts didn't seem to be expecting us, so we announced our presence with a megaphone, yelling chants in solidarity with Palestine. Curious students began to appear at the balconies, looking down at the ensuing chaos of security. After a couple of minutes, they realised we weren't leaving, and began packing away their champagne glasses and canapés onto trollies. We'd successfully disrupted the leaving drinks, yay!!

However, we knew we couldn't stop at disruption – we needed to completely prevent the event from taking place. After a short game of cat and mouse, it didn't take long before SHAGers had blocked both entrances into the new venue at Hallam Hall with a banner. Security clearly didn't know how to handle us, they called for reinforcements from our old friend Simon Verrall, Security Operations Manager at the University of Sheffield. Sadly, Verrell seemed shy and didn't say hi. We even had a visit from pigs in uniform, who came to stare and point at us, but realised they couldn't do much to stop our legitimate protest against genocide. Five hours after we'd first gathered outside the Owen Building, we clocked off and went to the pub for a pint and chips!

On Divorcing Chris Husbands

I recently asked my lecturers if they would miss Professor Sir Chris Husbands, the esteemed outgoing Vice-Chancellor of Sheffield Hallam University. They both let out a laugh, before one elaborated with a sharp, "No." When I asked students in a lecture the same question they simply stared blankly and asked, "Who?"

After 7 very long years as head of Hallam, Husbands reportedly became a highly respected voice in the higher education sector, although you wouldn't know it by asking anyone here. In December 2023, Student activists crashed his lavish leaving do the day after all 4000 teaching staff were invited to take voluntary severance packages. Now he has finally left, and many of us cannot help but breathe a sigh of relief and think to ourselves, 'good riddance!'

Those in the sector who don't know Husbands' name know his legacy; the widely hated Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) which he helped create and currently chairs is the bane of many lecturers' lives. TEF is a bureaucratic survey largely designed for the benefit of new applicants that aims to measure teaching quality but it misses the crucial fact that there is no consensus around a definition of teaching excellence or how to measure it. Staff must spend hours complying with forms to get a ranking for their university that serves only for prospective

students to assess the ‘value’ of their degrees. It is this that has given Husbands his revered status among senior management peers in the sector and leaves a bad taste in the mouth of staff that have had to engage with TEF.

Husbands might think of himself as the progressive face of the modern university. One who argues raising fees is tone-deaf but doesn’t have the balls to call for their abolition by, say, taxing the rich. As the first in his family to go to university at a time before tuition fees, you’d think he might understand the importance of fully funded public universities. Yet under his stewardship, Sheffield Hallam has fully embraced the logic of marketised universities – universities which prioritise blunt quantitative metrics like employability, student satisfaction and the financial bottom line, corrupting the purpose of education to work for the needs of businesses and the state, rather than students and staff. Now the university is in a deep financial crisis it is us who face the consequences.

There is no love lost between him, students and teaching staff. In my short time at Hallam I have seen him lurch from disaster to debacle. I saw him enthusiastically encourage students back amid a pandemic and then when teaching was inevitably forced online, shirk responsibility for the subsequent mental health crisis and failure to support students in isolation. When students in Hallam halls erupted in anger as part of the largest wave of rent strikes the UK had seen for 40 years, furious we were paying thousands through the nose for rooms we didn’t need, Chris stood by, politely asking landlords to pretty please give concessions but careful not to criticise the system of financialised student housing he had helped create.

That year he also helped the Students’ Union management force through austerity measures at the SU which was losing money, closing down the bar and cafe – the only potential money making ventures at the Union – and helpdesk, cutting 40% of full-time staff. Later he would tell me loudly, and frustrated, that he would no longer fund a failing union that could not make money, ignoring that for years the SU had suffered from underinvestment and now was being punished for the this, instead of assigning more of our fees or taking a cut from his £260,000 pay check to fix the problem.

Very soon after the murder of Sarah Everard, a report from the Women in Tech society found its way into The Times via rent strike organisers. The report found 126 cases of sexual harassment at one department, across two terms. During the rent strike we uncovered countless cases of sexual violence as women shared openly with us how they had been harassed and raped and how the university had failed them. We sent these testimonies to Husbands and instead of offering to meet with us, in return got a bleak corporate stock response. After the report was published, the university promised changes had been made. But students and staff are sceptical and the fact I cannot find nor recall what concrete changes were made should speak for itself.

The calamities continued into my second year; two weeks into her new job as an associate lecturer at Hallam, Dr Shahd Abusalama, a Palestinian refugee and activist who had just completed her PhD at the university was suspended without pay after a smear campaign accusing her of antisemitism, sparking international outrage. This was not the first time something like this had happened; before I enrolled, members of the Palestine society at Hallam were reported to Prevent for well, being pro-Palestine activists. Shahd beat the allegations but the damage was done and an otherwise brilliant academic and lovely person left Hallam in disgust at how the university, and Husbands, had treated her.

Among the students and staff who had the misfortune of meeting the pint-sized professor, Husbands leaves a legacy of persecution of activists, timidity to speak out against the failures of

the sector — until the last moment when he decided to leave, and even then half-heartedly — and tone deaf insistence that he knows best and campus unions must subordinate themselves to his will. I could be here all day listing the spitefulness and incompetence that occurred on his watch, including spying on striking staff, he and his cronies spending six months spying on a rent strike organiser and angering writers like Phillip Pullman by cutting the English Literature course, but he doesn't deserve the ink.

I took a year out of university last year. I became at peace with the fact he probably won't be held accountable for any of this, and likely doesn't believe he did much wrong. In one sense I have some sympathy, he is only one part of a wider higher education system that is rotting from the top down and a similar story can be found with Vice-Chancellors at nearly every UK university — it would be dishonest to put all the responsibility at his door. Regardless, the last time I saw him he was furiously pointing at me through a window as I attended a protest and I'm grateful we need never interact again.

To paraphrase Hunter S. Thompson in his obituary of Richard Nixon, I have had my own bloody relationship with Husbands for many years, but I am not worried about it landing me in hell with him. I have already been there with that bastard, and I am a better person for it. Husbands had the ability to make his enemies seem honourable, and we developed a keen sense of fraternity. Some of my best friends have hated Husbands, even the ones at other universities. My lecturers and their colleagues around the country who've been subjected to TEF hate Husbands, former SU officers hate Husbands, fellow students (that are aware of him) hate Husbands, I hate Husbands, and this hatred has brought us together. Goodbye Chris, you won't be missed.

A Note on Repression

Whilst these actions have been largely successful, as our tactics adapt and change, so do those of our enemies. In recent years we have seen an escalation in repression tactics from both universities, including large fines and disciplinaries. They've also used underhand tactics like assaulting students and hiring private investigators (hello, Intersol Global and Horus Security). Medicine, banners and possessions have been stolen too.

At other universities we've seen violent evictions of occupations, students reported to counter-terror police & SU officers hounded out by staff. Like state repression, this is all designed to deter organising and scare us into hiding — it hasn't worked.

As their response changes, we learn how to keep ourselves safe from repression. We've kept our security practices up to date — when Universities don't know who we are, we're safer. More importantly than security, we're building a culture of community and care for each other. We've kept up our actions and organising whilst supporting our comrades who've been the victims of repression — we're not going away any time soon.

An illegal wild camp on Kinder Scout

On Friday 13th January 2023, a high court judge decided in favour of the Dartmoor landowners who were challenging the national park authority. This ruling removed Dartmoor as the last area in England and Wales where wild camping was legal. The land access campaign Right to Roam responded a week later by holding a mass trespass on Dartmoor attended by thousands, and we stood in solidarity by organising a simultaneous wild camp on Kinder Scout in the Peak District. This was an illegal trespass, as was then the case for wild camping everywhere in England and Wales. Kinder Scout is especially notable not just for being the highest point in the East Midlands, but also for being the site of the famous 1932 Mass Trespass. This event is dearly held in the popular imagination as a vital step in the fight for open access land – although this was not achieved until nearly 17 years later in 1949, and today it still only covers a pitiful 8% of England and Wales.

Six of us hiked up a treacherously icy Grindsbrook Clough in the fading light, with the temperature plus windchill reaching as low as -10°C. We unfurled our two banners, one specially made reading “No landowners – the stars are for everyone”, and one of our favourites, the iconic and ridiculously big “trans power” banner. Following a photo shoot with a complicated headtorch-based lighting system, a few of us trudged up to the nearby Grindsbrook Knoll to tweet our success with frozen fingers. After fighting to get our stoves lit for some dinner and the mandatory whisky and hot chocolate, we settled into sleep in our four tents, with one brave – or silly – comrade bestie outside in a bivvy bag! In the morning sunrise light, we looked across the beautiful snowy moors, imagining a world without land ownership.

We demand Scotland-style wild camping laws, where the vast majority of the land is available to roam and sleep on. However, this is not enough – we must destroy land ownership, whereby a tiny percentage of the privileged population inherits or purchase the vast majority of the land, managing its ecosystems for their own selfish hobbies, such as tailoring moorlands for grouse shooting. We must rewild our countryside, and open it up to everyone. This is a core part of the action needed to work towards climate and social justice. Furthermore, it is an intersectional issue, as tragically the group who will feel the harshest enforcement of beefed-up anti-trespass and anti-wild camping laws is the Traveller community, who are already subjected to shocking racism by individuals, the press and the state. We must stand in solidarity with them and fight the violence of the state, and the existence of land ownership.

Following a ruling on the 31st of July 2023, wildcamping was made legal once more on Dartmoor. Today Dartmoor, tomorrow the entirety of these isles!

ALERTA! ALERTA! Report — The fash come to Wath Upon Dearne

The fascist organisation Yorkshire Rose called a demo for February 18th 2023 at 14:00 outside a hotel housing refugees, so antifascists mobilised to confront them. A contingent in grey and black bloc arrived early to secure the front of the hotel and prevent the fascists from gaining access, fearing a repeat of the recent scenes in Liverpool where fash had attempted to fight their way into the hotel. The police had already seen to this however, as they were out in force with a number of vans over two hours before the fascist demonstration was due to start, and had tall fencing in front of the hotel arranged into two semi-enclosed pens. The bloc, who attempted to stand on the pavement in front of the hotel with banners reading “no-one is illegal/abolish borders”, “¡No Pasarán!” and “Yorkshire against hate/no borders/no nations” were informed of Section 14 (police imposed conditions on an assembly) in place, requiring them to move to the designated area for counter-protesters inside the fenced pen, or be arrested. Of course, none of them knew what a Section 14 was, and struggled immensely to hear the police’s repeated explanations. After pushing it for a bit, the bloc was eventually moved into the pen and engaged in some delightful verbal abuse of the several fascists filtering into the neighboring pen that had been designated for them.

Stand Up to Racism (SUTR), and the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) counterparts, were the next to arrive, turning up around 12:00 in several cars to unload the inevitable stall and astro-turfing placards. At around 12:30, three coaches organised by the Sheffield Trade Union Council (TUC) arrived, carrying several hundred counter-protesters straight into the police-organised pen. As they set up the sound system and began some chanting and speeches, the coppers had formed a loose line on the two sides of the designated area not fenced in, while the bloc continued to exchange obscenities with the nazi scum opposite, resourcefully employing a nearby flagpole to raise an antifascist flag while playing techno versions of Bella Ciao. There were around 300 counter-protesters and less than ten fascists in the opposite pen, with the exact number fluctuating as they regularly got demoralized and left due to the constant shouts of “nazi scum”, “Patriotic Alternative is run by nonces”, “dirty fucking bastards” et cetera.

This felt like a success, however, the news gradually filtered through that the fascist demo wasn’t in the nearly-empty police designated pen but instead had moved to next to a nearby roundabout, where 50–100 nazis had banners preaching their hateful ideology to the traffic, completely unopposed. Upon hearing this, the bloc did its best to organise itself through word of mouth, and about forty antifascists ran past the rather thin police line on one of the sides of the protest area which was unfenced. They then legged it to the fence separating the hotel parking lot from the main road, and jumped over that too, after a moment of hesitation due to the police shouting at them to remain in place, while comrades who had already jumped the fence urged them to follow. There was an impromptu march towards the roundabout with several banners; upon reaching the opposite side of the roundabout from the fash, there were several attempts to

take the road and reach the bad guys, but each time lacked sufficient commitment and the half a dozen coppers who had caught up pushed them back onto the pavement each time.

After several minutes of this, police reinforcements arrived and, forming into a large clump, began violently shoving the bloc back towards the hotel. The pushing was unpleasant and forceful, with people constantly being forced to tread on each other's toes and bump into each other to prevent falling over & being trampled. The antifascists chanted "Who do you serve? Who do you protect?" at the cops assaulting them, as they prevented the counter-protesters confronting the fascists who had been allowed to move their protest, while the counter-demonstration had not been allowed to move. After several minutes of violence from the police, the breakout group was pushed back into the main crowd, who roundly ignored their plight and the conduct of the police, despite repeated requests for the person on the SUTR microphone to call out the police's behaviour. This left a very bitter taste in many mouths and was felt to be a betrayal of solidarity within the counter-demo.

In response to this first breakout, the cops strengthened both their lines on the two unfenced sides of the counter-demo using police who had riot helmets slung at their waists. A second attempt was made to organise the bloc into a coordinated breakout to confront the fascists. Around 30 people rushed into a police line in an attempt to get past, however they were violently pushed back into the crowd after a couple minutes of shoving. The police were refusing to let people who looked 'suspicious' leave their containment, only allowing small groups of mostly unmasked people to leave to go to the toilet in the nearby KFC if they politely insisted on their innocence.

Looking for other ways out, a brief attempt was made by some individuals to pull down a section of fencing. They managed to lower it most of the way to the ground, however a self-policing member of the crowd started shouting at them and grabbing them, and police quickly rushed around to put the fence back up. Around this point there wasn't much for the bloc to do except chant at the people in the Aldi car park opposite the protest area, several of whom were fascist protesters, and others who were sympathetic to them and looking at the counter-demo in disgust. Of course, these reactionaries were policed significantly more lightly, being allowed to remain on the pavement and car park opposite without being forced with the threat of arrest into a designated protest area, like us counter-protesters had been. Eventually, both demonstrations winded down and plans were made to disperse. Upon hearing that the police intended to pull 'troublemakers' aside and not let them leave, one comrade in the TUC who actually understood the meaning of solidarity responded by saying that if everyone couldn't leave, then no one would leave. The police let everyone go and there were no arrests as people were leaving, which was surprising but welcome.

Sheffield Action Group has some tactical reflections on the counter-demo, as improving our organisation in the coming months will be vital as fascist street movements are clearly on the rise, with this protest being just one of five happening across the country that day. It was good that the TUC put effort into organising a mass mobilisation and booked some coaches, as this helped boost the numbers who attended to the impressive total of at least 300. However, there is a difference between a rally and a counter-demonstration. The protest resembled a classic uninspired city centre protest, with a pre-arranged speaker list, lots of stalls and lots of SWP-aligned placards. When it became clear that the fascists had not in fact been scared home, but were holding a protest with 50–100 people unopposed by the roundabout, in the full view of an A-road's worth of traffic, we should have marched to confront them in larger numbers. We need to scare white supremacist nazis off our streets and keep going until their hateful ideology has

no reach at all. We can't achieve this if they don't even see our superior numbers, and don't hear us chanting scum at them. While it's true they failed in their main objective of protesting outside the front of the hotel, they still managed to hold a large protest in full public view, virtually unopposed directly by anti-fascists.

As always, it is partly the fault of the police for enforcing Section 14 on the counter-demonstrators and forcing us into the pen, but not enforcing it on the fascists, allowing them to protest freely where they wanted. But that doesn't mean we should passively allow our mobilisation to be blunted and not have the full, scary, demobilising effect on the fascists it should have had. While we might have run into a situation where a mass attempt was made to move the demo and it failed due to the threat or deployment of police violence, the fact no mass attempt was even made by the so-called 'organisers' is disappointing.

Furthermore, at times there were worrying levels of self-policing by both individuals in the counter-protest, and also organisers. People in bloc chanting insults at the fascists were repeatedly berated under the guise of optics and sensibility politics, while the person on the SUTR microphone addressed the bloc and asked them to "not kick off". Why are we there if not to kick off? You don't defeat fascism by having a well-polished speaker list, you defeat it by confronting fascists and scaring them off. Nonetheless, this was the first major antifascist mobilisation in the area for some time, and the turnout was undeniably admirable. We will be organising to keep this momentum going into the inevitable future fascist mobilisations which will be coming up soon, while continuing to discuss the tactics and strategy of how to defeat them.

Sheffield Pride

It was a bit silly that a city as large as Sheffield and with such a vibrant Queer community lacked a pride march. Without one from 2020 to 2022, there was an opportunity to organise something grassroots and political. Corporate prides, with banks sponsoring floats and organisers working with police, are fundamentally opposed to the radical action which won the rights we have today. We must return to this tradition to fight the rising tide of transphobia and work towards Queer Liberation.

Many Sheffield Action Group activists are part of a new group called Sheffield Radical Pride. We (SRP) organised our first demonstration on Saturday April 1st, following the Trans Day of Visibility under the banner of 'Joy, Power, Protest', with 200 people turning out in an act of collective queer joy. Since then we have organised the Sheffield summer Pride event that saw 500 queers take to the streets under the banner of total queer liberation. Pride 2024 is now being planned for June 15th!

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Troublemakers #1 is the first issue of Sheffield Action Group's Troublemakers zine. Sheffield Action Group (SHAG) are a queer youth-led direct action collective operating in Sheffield, UK, largely doing anti-imperialist work against universities in the city. This zine outlines the group's thinking and politics, and provides a history of action from March 2022 through to December 2023.

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