

The Anti-G8 Protests In Calgary

Some Contributions To A Critique Of The Anti-Globalization Movement

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Synopsis: An analysis from an anarcho-communist perspective of the anti-globalization movement in the context of the G8 protest in Calgary with a special focus upon the impact of Sept 11th, and contradictions between the movement's reformist and revolutionary tendencies. Contains a discussion on the weaknesses of the concepts of "anti-capitalism" and "diversity of tactics" as expressed by the movement's radical wing. Tom Keefer is a member of the North Eastern Federation of Anarcho-Communists (NEFAC).

The Long Shadow Of The Twin Towers

It is clear that after a string of successes (beginning with Seattle and carried on in Washington and Quebec City), that the anti-globalization movement has lost ground in its ability to mobilize large numbers in North

America in the wake of September 11th and the attendant "war on terrorism" launched by US imperialism. The forces of reaction have been strengthened by the attacks of Sept 11th, and many of those we would seek to rally to our cause have lined up behind the flags of patriotism or have been intimidated into silence by a dramatic increase in state surveillance and repression in conjunction with the mass detention and deportation of "suspect" Muslims, Arabs and undocumented immigrants.

From the perspective of the global capitalist ruling class, the development of the anti-globalization movement has been one of the most threatening forces to its hegemony in past decade. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the seeming end to any alternatives to the consolidation of world imperialism, the mass protests against capitalist globalization have broken the illusion of a national and global consensus in favour of privatisation, de-regulation and corporate rule, as well as holding within them the seeds of real alternatives to capitalism. Within this movement, the rise of anarchist principles and ideology, the organizing of grass roots, democratically controlled affinity groups and federative structures willing to step outside the bounds of legality, the eschewing of tactics of lobbying and reformism and the turning towards direct confrontation with the defenders of the status quo, have alarmed the capitalist class and its social democratic appendages to no end.

The capitalist class clings to power above all else, and threatened by a rising anti-globalization movement, it has sought to portray "violent" anti-globalization activists as part of the same attack on "western civilization" as the suicide bombers of the Al-Qaeda network. In the wake of the September 11th attacks, the capitalist state has taken the offensive in linking up the "war against terrorism" to the criminalization of the radical wing of the anti-globalization movement.

In the lead up to the June G8 summit, under the guise of defending state interests from the twin evils of Osama Bin Laden and violent protestors, the Prime Minister of Canada, various military officials, and local politicians all announced steps that made even simple protest illegal at the G8 events in Kananaskis and Calgary. In the context of the largest military operation to take place on Canadian soil this century, protestors were warned that they would be shot on sight should they breach the conference's security perimeter, and in Calgary, all public protests of the G8- with the exception of a labour/community march and a picnic- were declared illegal assemblies by the Mayor who promised hundreds of jail cells as homes for any activists bold enough to disobey him.

Social Democrats, Trade Union Bureacrats And Ngo Mandarins

Hand in hand with attempts to smash the anti-globalization movement through state repression have come numerous attempts to co-opt and integrate the liberal “main stream” elements of this movement into a “loyal opposition” limited to critiques of the worst excesses of the system and proposing only mild reforms. Just as one wing of the movement has moved into criticizing the capitalist system as a whole and has advanced the question of its abolition; the mirror image of this tendency- generalled by social democrats, trade union bureaucrats, and NGO mandarins, has also sought ascendancy within the movement by seeking to corall protest within the bounds of legality and to mitigate the system’s outrages through the charade of electoralism and surface reforms.

The ruling class is aware of this split, which historically speaking has been present in every social movement, and has sought to buy off the reformists and to increase their strength by providing hundreds of thousands of dollars in direct funding to large numbers of “non governmental organizations”, their conferences and “people’s summits” as well as by seeking to create and solidify a “dialogue” between state, capital and “responsible” NGO’s capable of reining in and isolating the young malcontents and their allies. Perhaps one of the most visible manifestations of this tendency of betrayal can be seen at repeated anti-globalization protests where the labour bureaucracy has repeatedly and consciously lead tens of thousands of their members into isolated areas far away from the scenes of action and protest, to misinform and demobilize them through lengthy speeches and boring music, and to physically separate “their” members from radical protest elements through the muscle of their marshals.

Organization Of The Protests In Calgary

As has often been the case, the activist “leadership” that organized the latest protests against capitalist globalization in Calgary was, split between a would be more “radical” youth wing espousing the values of “anti-capitalism” and of a “diversity of tactics” and a more conservative layer made up of labour, community and NGO activists which sought to organize “non-confrontational” and educational events. As both groups accepted that protest directed at the summit location itself in far off Kananaskis was unfeasible due to the difficulties of blockading a remote backcountry location under the threat of severe state repression, organizers settled on a focus in Calgary itself.

Broadly speaking, the youth focused on street protests (J-26) aimed to disrupt the interests of the corporate interests behind the G8 while the established social democratic leadership held an “alternative” summit and sought to bring out their members to a large, non-controversial protest and a picnic in the park. Throughout the course of the week of protests and educational activities, approximately 3000 and 4000 people participated in the range of activities against the G8 in Calgary. There was a small degree of support from the local population of Calgary, but no major groundswell of popular support, and no widespread “buzz” in the air in the weeks before the protests as there was in Quebec City.

A significant reason for this low turnout was no doubt the difficulties that many local activists faced in trying to organize events on the scale and with the same expectations of previous anti-globalization protests, away from the continent’s major population centres and in communities with a much weaker tradition of radical organizing. Nonetheless, even though organizers had

been working on the G-8 protests for almost a year, there was very little communication with out of town activists as to what was going on, about what to expect, and in what specific ways those coming from out of town could be of assistance.

Mainstream media organizations played up the risks of “violence” and gleefully trumpeted the military and police preparations being undertaken to repress dissent. Participation by coherently structured affinity groups active in the lead-up to the protests with a clear idea of what they wanted to accomplish was also almost non-existent. There were approximately 20–25 affinity groups present at the last spokescouncil before the G8 summit opened, and they seemed to be for the most part very loosely organized as well as not incorporating the majority of participants in the actions of J-26.

The focus of the J-26 direct actions was against the corporate sponsors of the G8, and was aimed at creating maximum economic disruption to the downtown core. It would seem that the media inspired hype in the weeks before the protests was more effective in doing this than the J-26 protest itself. Businesses were boarded up, special security measures were taken, and workers were told not to come into work in “business clothes” due to the threat of “violence” from protestors. The plans for J-26 were based upon having a so called “snake march”, an idea apparently derived from OCAP’s campaign of economic disruption in November of 2001 in the province of Ontario. Unfortunately, the “snake march” proved to be little different from a typical disorganized protest march with organizers bereft of sound equipment and lacking a clear sense of what to do.

The radical youth leadership that organized the direct action “disruptive” actions against the G8 was largely made up of activists from anarchist based “anti-capitalist” youth groups based in Calgary and Edmonton who it would seem leaned heavily on the activities and ideological perspectives of such anti globalization based groups as the Montreal based Convergence of Anti-Capitalist Struggles (CLAC). The political orientation of the Calgary based organizers group could be largely summed up by two political concepts which for them underlined the best way to confront the G8: a commitment to “anti-capitalism” and to a “diversity of tactics”. However, there was never any clear political elaboration or discussion of what these terms actually meant, rather, these terms came to be treated as fetishized commandments which had fallen from the skies of Quebec City.

The Poverty Of “Protest Porn”

An “anti-capitalist caucus” was held to incorporate “anti-capitalists” involved with the J-26 actions. Unfortunately, other than a vague consensus that they were opposed to “capitalism” there was no understanding or agreement by this caucus as to what exactly capitalism is, how it operates, or how and by whom it can best be opposed. There was next to no meaningful discussion of how class, race, patriarchy and struggles for native sovereignty impacted upon capitalism or movements for its abolition, nor was there any discussion and analysis of what capitalism could be replaced with and what role could be played by various social movements and the working class (who, in withdrawing their labour, can bring about an immediate cession to capitalist production.)

Instead “anti-capitalism” became a strategy of producing “shocking” and symbolic spectacles-“protest porn” -which had the effect of neither shutting down the corporate center of Calgary,

nor of reaching out to un-politicized workers and linking up to their struggles or concerns. Some of these actions included a “die-in” in a park, getting naked in front of the Gap, having a group of people take off their clothes and cover themselves in mud and grunt as they cavorted through the streets, and the playing of two 5 minute games of “anarchist” soccer on a downtown intersection following the snake march protest.

It thus seems that an “anti-capitalist” strategy was believed by most attendees of the anti-capitalist caucus to consist of either an irrelevant fashion statement or an apolitical and unplanned clash with the forces of authority, and given the balance of forces confronting activists in Calgary, most chose to opt for the former. From the caucus one would never have guessed of the existence of something called the working class and that it might have any relationship to capitalism worthy of the name, or that the broad masses of that class need to consciously mobilize themselves for the creation of a fundamentally different kind of social system, should any anti-capitalist struggle seek to be ultimately successful. Nor did it strike members of the caucus that perhaps some of the many people we were supposedly trying to reach with our message might be interested in hearing about what kinds of alternatives we might propose to the capitalist order that we criticize so voraciously.

The actions proposed in both the spokescouncil and the anti-capitalist caucus, would have been appropriate (or would have been at least a benignly irrelevant) had Calgary in fact been shut down by protestors due to a broad based and effective conjuncture of social upheaval and confrontation with the forces of state and capital. But in the context of a social movement in the process of becoming isolated from its would be supporters by a state orchestrated campaign of repression, and given the crying need for the movement to deepen and extend its influence at this critical junction, these actions were a useless diversion at best, and a stupid farce at worst.

“Actions” like this serve only to draw a line between the radical “anti-capitalists” and ordinary working people who while exploited by capitalism, can see pretty clearly that a movement made up of naked, grunting, mud covered middle class “earth people” has little to concretely offer them in overcoming the oppressive conditions of their lives.

Similarly, how a handful of people playing soccer, watched by a passive mass of 500 others for a short period of time in the context of a crassly commercial and profoundly nationalistic ongoing World Cup event constitutes a relevant representation of “anarchism” or for that matter, “anti-capitalism”, was never explained by anyone inside the caucus.

The police realized their position of strength sooner than the protestors realized their weaknesses, and having already succeeded in keeping the activists on the defensive through draconian security measures, they saw no need whatsoever to intervene against the marches and protests being planned as long as no effective forms of protest occurred (i.e. civil disobedience or direct action). They were tolerant of a badly organized “snake march” wandering around town for some 4 hours on the 26th, and tolerant of the anarchist football players for an hour or two after that, tolerant of anti-McDonalds protestors, and indeed as long as the whole affair remained a minor inconvenience, they were unwilling to tip their hand. Instead, roving squadrons of bicycle cops cordoned off potential targets of vandalism, while riot police were kept carefully hidden, and no arrests were made. From reports after the fact in the mainstream media it was clear that the police were aware that they would lose the propaganda war should they start breaking heads without any provocation whatsoever.

The reason for the relative police inaction, is that there is still widespread if passive support for the anti-globalization movement, and the forces of order could not risk that the brutally oppres-

sive nature of the capitalist state would be further thrown into relief by attacking deliberately peaceful protestors. Resistance to police repression in Seattle and Quebec City and the representation of this resistance in popular culture severely undermined the legitimacy of the state, and in Calgary as long as things “didn’t get out of hand” the police were content to regain legitimacy through such media stunts as providing free bottled water to dehydrated activists, and to portray themselves as consensus building “partners” with the “responsible” section of protestors in keeping the event “safe” and “respectful” of the interests of all parties.

In both the “anti-capitalist caucus” and in the larger spokescouncil there was very little willingness to organize direct actions or civil disobedience activities similar to those that have happened in other anti-globalization protests. In the case of the Calgary protests, a clear and open discussion of the actual state of struggle, the level of state repression, and what our goals and tactics were to be given that the summit couldn’t be shut down, was necessary – but totally discouraged.

The fact was that the defining moments in Calgary consisted of spectacles devoid of meaningful political content. This was a direct reflection of the success of state repression on one hand, and our poverty of political analysis and inability to respond by modifying tactics and strategy on the other. In the immediate run up to the summit, it became clear that the forces of law and order were well organized and prepared to unleash a campaign of mass violence and arrest upon any effective form of protest. This was compounded by the fact that anti-globalization activists were in a state of strategic retreat and tactical incoherence.

The protest organizers were idealistically hoping for a simple replay of the protests of Quebec City, and were either unable or unwilling to take into account global, regional and local changes that had occurred and which had altered the balance of forces in the interval. At first, the organizers refused to entertain any suggestion that the concept of “diversity of tactics” could be flawed when considered from a revolutionary perspective. Yet several days later, under the pressure of events, the organizers abandoned this principle, deciding that they would permit no “civil disobedience” or direct action during the course of the J26 snake march and “economic disruption”. While this may have been in fact a correct decision in order to incorporate last minute participation from labour to save the march from an embarrassing lack of numbers, it should have been clear weeks if not months earlier on that this was the case, and direct action alternatives to the snake march should have been prioritised instead. As it was, direct action was ephemerally relegated to the realm of various imaginary affinity groups who would be free to organize there actions free from the support of those who came out for the snake march.

A Diversity Of Radical Liberals

The concept of a “diversity of tactics” (an understanding that a full range of tactical options from civil disobedience to physical confrontation with the police) which was an unshakable basis of unity of the direct action grouping that organized J-26, first came to the attention of the movement when the sell out wing of the anti-globalization movement sought to eliminate more militant direct action groups (such as CLAC-CASA) from participation in the movement in the lead up to the Quebec City protests.

It should be clear to all revolutionaries that a wide variety of tactics, up to and including physical confrontation with the agents of the ruling class will be necessary if we are to defeat this system. It should be equally clear that a process of self discipline and democratic determination

of how and when to use “violent” tactics is of paramount importance in order that it be effective. Otherwise, a blanket statement of being in support of “diversity of tactics” draws no lines between the black block clashing with police lines; the indiscriminate violence engaged in and encouraged by undercover cops acting as ‘agents provocateurs’ (this was a significant feature of the Genoa demonstrations); the armed violence and bombing campaigns carried out by groups like ETA or the Red Brigades (or, in Italy again, by the secret police, as in their bombing of the Bologna railway station); and finally, the kind of operations that might be mounted by Al-Qaeda agents should they happen to target a pro-globalization summit.

This refusal to actually define what kinds of “violence” we see as necessary and useful and in what conditions, will not only leave us open to attack from the state but will give right wing propagandists a golden opportunity to lump us in with Al-Qaeda and co. and to justify our wholesale repression. The concept of “diversity of tactics” is problematic for its extreme liberalism and its tendency to avoid self discipline, mutual accountability and the important debate as to which tactics at a given moment are actually necessary to achieve victory or to avoid defeat. A movement where anyone and any group carries out “violent” attacks on the state and capital whenever they please and regardless of whether or not its actions are harmful to the overall movement is no movement at all.

Supporters of “diversity of tactics” may argue that any attempt to limit anyone else’s tactics is “authoritarian”, but if we are not able to democratically come up with a strategy that works given our particular conditions, it is clear that our movement, in lacking any kind of self discipline will never succeed. It is clear that reformists, social democrats and trade union bureaucrats will try with all their might to keep protests “respectable” and “legal” and will seek to strangle all forms of protest which break from passive symbolism or lobbying. Nonetheless, we must be clear that to defeat the tyranny of capitalism with its riot police, SWAT teams, army, secret services, our use of “violence” will be undeniably necessary for own self defence, not to mention our eventual victory. This does not mean that success can be achieved from going head to head with the forces of repression- that is a recipe for disaster. What we need is an ability within the radical movement of being able to democratically decide what level of confrontation is tactically necessary given current conditions and to be able to carry it out on our own terms and within the limits that we set.

As summits are held in more and more inaccessible locations and strategies of attempting to “shut them down” become less feasible, our movement needs to discover how to use tactics of civil disobedience and direct action in ways that accomplish objectives other than shutting down summits, such as through opening squats, occupying government or corporate offices, joining striking workers on picket lines and otherwise concretely connecting with ongoing local struggles which can be tied into the larger struggle against capitalist globalization.

To take just one example of thinking differently, if protestors in Calgary had sought to fight the criminalization of dissent by for example setting up half a dozen “free speech zones” with sound trucks in a variety of busy intersections in the down town area and then used these platforms as a means to simultaneously engage with passer by’s and to disrupt business as usual, matters might have gone quite differently on J-26. These free speech zones, surrounded by phalanxes of disciplined protestors willing to defend them with civil disobedience and direct action would in effect become our own “mini-summits” engaging, dialoguing with and entertaining many of those not reached by our message of solidarity and struggle. The mass media would have had difficulty in disguising the fact that it was police trying to crash through our lines, and not our

attacks on them, that was the source of “violence” due simply to the fact that protestors were attempting to engage in free speech.

There are many other kinds of actions acceptable to a wide variety of people willing to take different kinds of risks than either passively marching around or seeking to break through summit perimeters. What is key in any of these actions is a) engaging in open discussion facilitated by decent intelligence gathering methods to come to a correct understanding of the balance of forces facing us, b) having well organized, disciplined and coherent affinity groups able to take on and carry out specific tasks and projects within the event, and c) a process of mass mobilization and education that is able to bring out enough protestors to be able to avoid wholesale repression from police.

Summit Hopping And Building A Movement

In recent months, many critiques have been made about “summit hopping”, and it is indeed true that those who do little radical work in their own communities and who, lemming like, just hop on a bus and arrive at the scene of the protest without an affinity group or plan of action are perhaps deserving of this critique. However, what critics of “summit hopping” tend to forget is that these summit protests and the movement they have given rise to have been the single most significant development in the past decade of resistance to the capitalist status quo. The key thing about these summit actions is that they allow us to multiply our strength and to reach a critical mass that we are not yet able to even come close to in the many isolated local struggles in which we engage.

In Seattle and Quebec City, we were able to directly confront the powers that be and in doing so, were able to capture the imaginations of millions of people across the world in a way that has not been seen since the struggles of the 1960’s. A break was created in capitalist hegemony and legitimacy, and through it the groundwork has been laid for a potential mass radicalisation of staggering proportions. This is the real reason as to why the capitalist state has responded so seriously to our movement and why it seeks to suppress us. They see perhaps more clearly than we do, that these various summit protests over the past several years have provided us with a sort of “short cut” method that has enabled us to bring together a wide tendency of activist currents and openly confront the state and capital in a manner not seen in a generation.

By Means Of A Conclusion

The location of events in Calgary, the spectre of state repression, and the fallout of Sept 11th mingled with the poverty of political analysis and organizational abilities of the activists concerned all contributed to this defeat. It should be noted that many of these factors are not as pronounced in Europe, where protests against capitalist globalization are involving ever increasing numbers as well as significant amounts of industrial action from striking workers. It is possible that the sagging fortunes of the North American anti-globalization movement will have to be revived through inspiration from “a new Seattle” coming from Latin America or Europe, but regardless, the only way for our movement to consolidate its gains to date and to further advance the struggle is to take stock of our weaknesses and to combat them.

In doing so anti-globalization activists must come to realize the importance of developing a coherent political analysis capable of understanding what “capitalism” is and how it can be overcome. We must realize that nothing can ever be truly destroyed until it is replaced, and thus come up with visions of what kind of a system it is that we wish to replace capitalism with, as well as to construct revolutionary organizations which can aid us in that task.

If we hope to succeed, another area in which the “anti-capitalist” wing of the anti-globalization movement needs to develop is in being able to contest areas of work that has until now overwhelmingly been the preserve of the reformists. The building of international networks, the organizing of alternative summits, mass circulation periodicals, and coherent media strategies with deep going anti-capitalist analyses desperately need to be provided so that we can win the battle of ideas against reformist ideologues who seek to use our movement for the purposes of gaining narrow reforms through the dead end of social democracy and electoralism.

Coming up with and popularizing truly anti-capitalist perspectives will be impossible without the creation of genuine revolutionary organizations with a mass base within the ranks of the oppressed and exploited . In constructing these organizations and in being able to gain tactical and strategic victories at various summits and protests, the creation of ongoing affinity groups and revolutionary federations that continue to exist, and indeed thrive on carrying out local actions in between major mobilizations will be essential.

The balance sheet from the G8 protests in Calgary adds up to a clear defeat for those in the anti-globalization camp. Even considering the objective difficulties encountered in organizing the protests, measured from the standpoint of our numbers, the self organization of affinity groups, internal democracy and political analysis, our tactical successes in causing economic disruption to downtown Calgary, and most importantly in our ability to intelligently reach out the general public and express what we are fighting for, the protests in Calgary were a failure. The defeat could have certainly been worse, but the anti-G8 protests in Calgary should come as a wake up call to our movement that a profound re-thinking of how we combat capitalist globalization is in order.

The chief cause of this failure lies in our ideological weaknesses and in a crisis of self-organization and radical institution building at the grassroots of our movement. By entering into a period of meaningful reflection and self organization, we can learn from our mistakes and come out of this process strengthened and re-invigorated to continue the battle against global capitalism at a new and higher level. The alternative that faces us is further retreat and co-option, widespread demoralization and the eventual demise of one of the most important movements to challenge global capitalism in the past decade.

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