

R2K Report

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The police stole our message.

The Philadelphia police, that is, before the massive direct action -- or should I say, "lawless rampage" -- outside the Republican National Convention on August 1.

"Zero hour" for the protests, as folks called our start time, was set for 3:30PM that day. At that moment, affinity groups would converge on selected targets throughout Center City, blockading key streets and intersections, while "flying squads" of other protesters would circulate throughout the entire area, reinforcing blockades or creating temporary ones of their own.

The tactical goal was to snarl as much traffic as possible for as long a time as possible. The objective was to draw attention to issues of criminal injustice, while inconveniencing convention delegates on their way to the GOP's festival of corporate wealth.

A few hours before the appointed time, police surrounded the cavernous West Philly building that had been dubbed the Ministry of Puppetganda. They arrested everyone inside -- about 70 Puppetistas -- and then destroyed everything that had been built there: giant puppets, banners, signs, and costumes. These protest props were to dramatize the policing and prison issues that motivated the direct action, and to communicate our vision of change.

It was a smart move by the police. Stripped of our means of communication, we looked as if we had no message to convey. This perception became a running theme in corporate media coverage of the August 1 demonstrations; we were cast as mindless hordes wreaking random havoc.

There were about two hours on Tuesday when chaos reigned, and I have to say it was glorious. Not the small-scale window-breaking, tire-slashing, and graffiti, mostly targeted at police vehicles; the use of those tactics in the context of a big direct action leaves me lukewarm at best. (The sort of property destruction where people sabotage experimental genetically modified crops and so forth: that makes my heart go pit-a-pat.)

What thrilled me in Philly was the success and character of the action from an organizational point of view. By about 5:00PM, all you needed to do if you wanted to know where disturbances were happening was to look up in the sky and follow the helicopters. I somehow never bothered to count them, but there were half a dozen at least, spread out over a large area.

Each helicopter hovered over an effective, autonomously organized blockade. Throughout the afternoon, the whirl of helicopters was joined by dozens of sirens, as long lines of police dashed around the city trying to contain the protests, only to encounter new disruptions in previously quiet locations. Center City was gridlocked, and delegate buses were stuck in the traffic before

they could even pick up their intended passengers. (I got a great photo of my affinity group in front of one such vehicle, flashing the message "Take Next Bus.") Delegates who wanted to get to the convention had to walk some distance before they could even hail a cab. We made our presence felt.

The decentralized character of the action rendered police surveillance ineffective and made our protest impossible to stop. The district attorney is already trying to pin conspiracy charges on people whom the authorities perceive as leaders, like Kate Sorensen of ACT UP/Philly or John Sellers, the director of the Ruckus Society, which trains activists in blockading and other non-violent techniques. (Their bail was initially set at a jaw-dropping \$1 million.) But the beauty of the action is that it wasn't a conspiracy. There was no central planning of the actual blockades: The people who created the various disruptions kept their plans to themselves, and no one knew everything that would go down. On the day of the action, communications people relayed information between the various geographic sectors, but there were no "leaders" in the usual sense, directing or even coordinating the course of events.

Instead, actions of this sort rely on organizers -- people who play a very different role. For Philly, these key activists crafted the call to action, focusing on police brutality and the prison-industrial complex; they got the word out about the protest, encouraged others to come, and handled endless logistical details.

The lasting significance of the Philly action won't be its effect on public opinion (and wouldn't have been, even if we hadn't bombed so badly in the media). It will be how and by whom it was organized. The Philly organizers were not the same crew that put together the Seattle WTO protests or the IMF and World Bank actions in Washington, D.C. (The overlap between the organizers of the two earlier actions was so extensive that many called the D.C. mobilization "cliquish.")

The major players in Philly were a good deal younger and far more racially diverse than the organizers of Seattle or D.C. Activists of color - including members of New York's SLAM (Student Liberation Action Movement) and Philadelphia ACT UP - were key in initiating the mobilization and played central planning roles throughout the months of organizing.

In twenty years of activism, I've never seen a comparable effort: a decentralized direct action based on affinity groups and consensus decision-making process, that was substantially shaped by people of color. Throughout the last two decades, the movements that have used this structure and process have been overwhelmingly white -- including the Seattle and D.C. mobilizations. In Philly, the issues, priorities, and analysis of movements of color intersected with an organizational style that was developed in predominantly white movements: The convergence was wonderful to see.

After Seattle, Elizabeth (Betita) Martinez published a widely circulated essay, "Where Was the Color in Seattle?" The piece, drawing on interviews with a number of young activists of color who attended the WTO protests, has sparked debate and action throughout the overlapping activist networks that make up the emerging movement for global justice. Many whites have taken anti-racism trainings in the months since, and have sought to make new alliances by supporting movements of color, rather than expecting activists of color to join predominantly white campaigns. Meanwhile, many activists of color -- inspired by Seattle and D.C., even though critical of their monochromatic character - have embraced and transformed the Seattle organizing model, as part of a longer-term renaissance of direct action within African-American, Latino, and Asian-American movements.

The Philly protests are an exciting sign of progress, an indication that sturdy bridges are beginning to form between predominantly people of color and predominantly white movements. If these alliances continue to strengthen, along with analogous bonds between labor and environmentalists, just imagine what this movement can do. Even without puppets.

You've heard of the Revolutionary Anarchist Black Bloc, with their controversial tactics and fierce demeanor. Philly marked the advent of a new force on the streets: the flying squad of the Revolutionary Anarchist Clown Bloc. Bedecked in silly wigs, red noses, and other trappings of resistance, the Clown Bloc aimed "to show the Republicans they are not the only clowns in town."

As they swarmed through the streets of Philadelphia, they left fellow protesters giggling over their deadpan take-offs on classic activist slogans: "Hey hey, ho ho, hee hee!" "Three word chant, three word chant" and so forth.

Their official communique, even more of an activist in-joke, stressed their political openness: "We are not, however, calling for a strictly anarchist clown bloc. We hereby open the call to those who do not identify as anarcho-clowns, but nonetheless struggle to create the same revolutionary antics: autonomist fan-dancers, situationist contortionists, anti-fascist jugglers, council communist hula-hoopers, wobbly tall-bike riders and stilt walkers, radical cheerleaders, primitivist fire breathers, and yes, even anti-state libertarian marxist mimes! Together, we can take back our lives from dominations by elephants, jackasses, ringleaders, and all others. Our intent is not to be divisive of the larger protests, but to support them by wearing very large shoes."

It was remarkable how many irony-impaired spectators didn't get the Billionaires for Bush (or Gore), several dozen delightful performers who marched under the slogan, "Because inequality isn't growing fast enough!" Wearing tuxedos and evening gowns in the Philadelphia heat, the Billionaires put it all in perspective:

"Gore or Bush, Bush or Gore,
we don't care who you vote for.
We've already bought 'em
We've already bought 'em"

"What do we want?"
Prison labor!
"How do we want it?"
Cheap!

My favorite Billionaire moments came when my friend Alex took some of the paper money he was carrying and sidled up to journalists from the corporate media. He'd take a fake \$5000 bill and slip it into the journalists' hand or pocket: "You all are really doing a great job for us," he'd say. "We're really happy with what you've been doing."

During the most chaotic part of the day on Tuesday, I was walking not far from City Hall with Alex and other members of my affinity group, when I spotted the loathsome Phil Gramm, Republican senator from Texas, heading right for us. "Hey Alex, that's Phil Gramm," I said. Alex was quick on his feet. "The party's over. The rich aren't going to have their way any more," said Alex. Gramm slowed down. "Bullshit," he replied (and I swear this is an exact quote). "The rich have always run everything, and they always will." What I would have given for a video camera.

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