

We the Peeps

L.A. Kauffman

April 2000

The best story I heard about the World Bank/International Monetary Fund actions in Washington, D.C. came from a North Carolina Earth First!er, concerning the Battle of the Peeps.

It was the second day of protests, and a row of menacing cops in riot gear faced a ragtag group of demonstrators, in one of many tense standoffs throughout the city.

The stalemate continued until one protester reached into his knapsack and pulled out a package of Marshmallow Peeps, those neon yellow confectionery chicks that appear in store shelves each Easter, and have developed a hipster cult following.

One by one the activist placed the Peeps in a row between the police and demonstrators: a thin yellow line. Then another protester pulled out a doll and started stomping the chicks with it. "Whose Peeps? Our Peeps!" the crowd began to chant, and the police broke out in laughter.

In an instant, the tension had melted: Even the most vicious cops aren't likely to pepperspray people who have just made them giggle. The Battle of the Peeps not only de-escalated conflict with a flourish; it also poked fun at some of our -- the activists' -- pretensions.

If the D.C. actions didn't have quite the same exuberant highs or harrowing lows as Seattle, they were much more powerful in terms of movement-building. Thousands of newly minted activists poured into town to take part in teach-ins, rallies, and direct action against corporate globalization, while groups with dramatically different agendas and styles found fruitful ways to cooperate.

But it's worth dwelling for a moment on how A16 and A17 played out on the ground, to ponder some strategic and political lessons learned.

At the final spokescouncil meeting for the protests, a D.C. resident commented that much of what had gone on seemed like war games to her. She had a point. The basic action scenario was to surround the World Bank/IMF meetings with a blockade, much as had been done in Seattle. Different affinity groups joined together in "clusters" and took responsibility for blocking a slice of the perimeter, some anchoring the location with a human barricade, others functioning as "flying squads" which provided reinforcements as needed.

I was part of the tactical team that coordinated flying squads from the New York cluster, in conjunction with clusters from Seattle, Colorado, Florida, and several other places. We spent endless hours before the actions planning how to use radio communications, bike runners, and bullhorns to deploy protesters as needed.

Our logistical discussions were filled with paramilitary lingo that became both more seductive

and more ridiculous as the big action day approached. Suddenly, we were referring to ourselves as "tac" or "com," discussing "scouts" and "recon." At least some wag had the good sense to give our supercluster the appropriately cheesy name of Rebel Alliance (and to broadcast "Star Wars" theme music as some of us lined up for negotiated arrests on A17).

What wasn't discussed, in big meetings or small, was why exactly we were doing a blockade, and doing it the same way as in Seattle. The actions were powerful, but it felt like a slogan -- shut it down -- had dictated our strategy, and defined our success. Plans already underway for a series of follow-up actions (most notably the Republican and Democratic Conventions in August, and a September meeting of the World Bank and IMF in Prague): Can we try something new?

More troubling was the secrecy that surrounded part of the blockade, and contributed substantially to our failure to stop delegates from reaching the meetings. During the big planning sessions before the actions, members of the organizing collective announced that several areas surrounding the meeting site were "taken care of," and no one needed to take them on.

Apparently, there was a plan to stop the delegates at the Kennedy Center, the staging ground for the meetings, through a high-tech Ruckus Society-type action, locking down to bus axles and the like. Like many such sneaky actions, this one proved too difficult to pull off; in the end, the planners gave up before even trying it.

The problem wasn't so much that a substantial part of the perimeter was thus left unblocked, and delegates were able to zip right in to the meetings. In the long view, these kind of tactical blunders rarely have anything like the importance they seem to have in the moment. The real damage in keeping a matter of such weight on the down low was to our democratic process: No one outside a small circle had input into the decision not to defend the whole perimeter.

There's a larger lesson here, about both tactics and transparency. Actions like the abortive Kennedy Center lockdown require high levels of secrecy; large movements, if they're to be truly democratic, require high levels of openness. The two simply can't be merged, meaning secret actions must be autonomous ones.

In any case, covertly organized actions -- from lockdowns to banner drops -- are the most useful when movements are small, for they allow a small number of people to leverage their power. We're in a different phase now, with increasing numbers of people becoming inspired to take action. In both Seattle and D.C., it was crowds of people, simply linking arms, who mainly held the blockades. Bicycle locks and other gear played a relatively small role. (Of course, several hundred lockboxes were confiscated in D.C. during raids by the police, based on eerily accurate intelligence about where they were being constructed and stored.)

But it's crucial to note, as anti-corporate and anti-capitalist activism continues to grow, that what we now have is a massive movement, but not a mass movement. Instead of ungainly organizations composed of undifferentiated individuals, the Seattle and D.C. mobilizations were created through coordination among many small, closeknit groups.

It comes back to peeps -- not in the sugar-shock sense, but in the hip-hop sense, of the folks you feel most comfortable around. Perhaps the most enduring contribution of identity politics to radical activism is its insight that diverse coalitions work best when members are strongly rooted in their own communities and collectives. And in the wake of the affinity-group-based actions in D.C., the peeps just keep getting louder. (4/19/00)

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



L.A. Kauffman
We the Peeps
April 2000

<https://web.archive.org/web/20021205094933/http://www.free-radical.org/issue5.shtml>
Issue #5 of Free Radical

theanarchistlibrary.org