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The Black Bloc: A Disposable Tactic

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EVER since the 1999 “Battle of Seattle” which stunned the ruling elites as they watched tens of thousands of militant workers, activists, mothers and others shut down their secretive World Trade Organisation summit, anarchists have been in the headlines: at the barricades facing down riot police in cities across the world.

Usually masked – to prevent identification and as protection against the teargas used by the repressive forces – and dressed distinctively in the traditional anarchist colour of black, the so-called “black bloc” has provided anarchism with its greatest public profile since the mass protest movements of the late 1960s.

Willing to take on riot police, to un-arrest demonstrators, to attack symbols of corporate and state power, and to help disrupt the summits of the rich, the black bloc, as anarchist street fighters, has become a favourite icon both of the left, which has to a greater or lesser degree celebrated its militancy. As for the right, it has used it as an example of the “violence” inherent in anarchism – neglecting to mention of course that states and corporations are founded on violence.

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The fact remains that it is via the black blocs that many militants are being introduced to anarchism for the first time. That is a base we must build on.

Following the success of Seattle, militant black blocs – usually working within broader “revolutionary anti-capitalist blocs” – took the message of an outraged working class to the parasitic elites every time they met: at the International Monetary Fund, World Bank and G8 summit in Washington (April 2000); at the World Economic Forum in Melbourne and at the IMF, WB and G8 summit in Prague (September 2000); at the European Union summit in Nice (December 2000); at the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas summit in Quebec City (April 2001); at the EU summit in Gothenburg (June 2001); and at the G8 summit in Genoa (July 2001) – to mention only the “violent” ones.

Taken together, the protests since Seattle (and including Seoul and Barcelona) have cost the bosses more than \$250-million in security precautions, damage to their precious property and lost profit squeezed from workers. On our side of the barricades, hundreds have been injured, scores jailed, tortured, criminalised and deported, several shot and, in a shocking murder that echoed around the world, a young anarchist, Carlo Giuliani, was shot dead by police in Genoa.

It is the anarchist message of working class direct action, spurning the professional activist groups and politicians of all shades, that has forced the world’s wealthiest parasites to run away into the Canadian Rockies and the desert of Qatar to plot and scheme against us. The anarchist principles of mass, global, multifaceted grassroots power and direct democracy are on the agenda like never before in recent history. But our “Prague Spring” is over. The police murder of Giuliani at the Genoa demonstration and the reconsolidation of right-wing forces have seen to that. Following Genoa, many anarchists have been calling into question the tactic of the black bloc.

Contrary to the attempts by the Italian and German states to pretend that the black bloc is some sort of “terrorist organisation”, it is neither terrorist nor an organisation. It is simply a tactic that has the following aims: to provide anarchism with a visible presence (for reasons of public propaganda as well as safety and easy co-ordination during chaotic protests); to maintain the militant momentum of protests and prevent them being channeled into useless talk-shops and petitions; to directly attack our class enemies and their institutions; and finally to defend ordinary protesters from police actions.

The black bloc tactic has been remarkably successful if measured against these aims, and among protesters, anarchists have gained a lot of respect, especially for our non-sectarian defence of pacifists and others targeted by police.

While most anarchist protesters were not involved in the black blocs at Genoa, preferring to march, as they should, with the tens of thousands of striking workers, the blocs themselves have increasingly become used as a tactic by other para-anarchist groups such as the autonomists, or non-anarchist groups, such as rank-and-file communists.

Genoa showed that the practice of masking up and dressing in black was provocateurs and undercover cops who then tarnished the blocs’ reputation by attacking illegitimate targets (non-state, non-police and non-corporate) and brawling with ordinary marchers.

The enemy strategy is clear:

1. criminalise the anarchists and other militant revolutionary protesters as “terrorists”,
2. destroy the ties of goodwill which they have built with the mass anti-globalisation movement in order to prevent the radicalisation of the movement by criminalising the black bloc

3. stage-managing “non-governmental” social forums parallel to the main capitalist summits so as to bog activists down in useless lobbying and create an impression of consultation
4. crack down on independent media outfits to ensure corporate media versions of events remain unchallenged, and
5. use the cover of the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States to introduce sweeping new police and intelligence powers to be used against all radical activists, whether anarchist or not.

The photographs of Mussolini shown to tortured activists in Genoa police detention show that the iron fist of fascism lies just beneath the velvet glove of the Western bourgeois “democracies”. In the last century, the elites plunged the world into a 70-year nightmare of fascism, bolshevism and genocidal war – all to prevent a true global workers’ revolution that between 1916 and 1923 nearly cost them all their stolen assets. This time we know what they are capable of and we must be on a war footing.

So, do we carry on protesting, agitating, educating, organising? Should we still participate in these mass protests? **Hell yes!** Anarchist ideas have taken centre stage in the new anti-capitalist movement and there is no way we should surrender that hard-won ground.

But this is a class war and we need to be flexible in our tactics and change swiftly where needed in order to keep the enemy off balance. For now, it is time to drop the black bloc tactic, go unmasked in daylight, and blend in with the workers. Since they are prepared for the black bloc, we need new approaches that will catch them off-guard.

In any case, in Southern Africa, despite our visible presence at marches against privatisation, war and racism, there are simply too few anarchist militants on the ground to constitute a tactically significant black bloc at protests.

This stands in good contrast to the strength of our ideas, which are winning an increasing audience among workers and the poor.

We must still wage a public information war against the elites through the revolutionary independent media; we must also build our own counter-intelligence networks and weed out infiltrators.

Far more importantly, we must build closer personal ties within the communities, unions and groups that we fight alongside so that trust is established, we build an indivisible web of support and we watch each other’s backs. Black blocs are not the best way to do this for now.

That is class solidarity and that – rather than gasmasks and molotovs – is, after all, what anarchism is all about.