

Notes on the October Rebellion

Tactical Feedback from the Streets of Georgetown, October 19, 2007

CrimethInc.

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Friday, October 19, over two hundred people staged an unpermitted march in one of the expensive shopping districts of Washington, D.C. to manifest opposition to the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. To our knowledge, this was probably the most—if not only—effective use of the black bloc tactic in Washington, D.C. since the Presidential Inauguration in 2005. This is promising, given the opportunities for mass action coming up in 2008. At the same time, there were some things that could have been improved, which we chalk up to inexperience and the usual internal dissension; in the interests of constructive criticism, we'll chiefly be reviewing those here.

To disclose the limitations of this analysis at the outset, none of us were involved in the organization leading up to the march, only in the action itself. We'll leave it to others to derive and share specific lessons from the organizing process.

SCHEDULING

There were several other events in the course of the weekend; focusing on this one here is not intended to undercut the significance of the others. At the same time, it strikes us as a tremendous missed opportunity that so many “national mobilizations” in D.C. were scheduled for different days in October. Earlier in the month there had been an anti-war march, and the following Monday there was civil disobedience on the theme “no war, no warming”—and to make matters worse, an hour away in Baltimore there was a radical bookfair running the entire weekend. One of the lessons of the so-called “Anti-Globalization” movement was that the more events coincide with each other, the more effective each can be. The “no war, no warming” blockades on Monday morning—basically just lines of people with their arms linked together—could only have lasted longer than the few minutes they did if the police had been busy dealing with a militant march like the one that took place Friday night. Whether this was a failure of communication, diplomacy, or imagination, let's hope that next time organizers will coordinate their efforts.

LOCATION

Anyone who misses the connection between playgrounds of the wealthy such as Georgetown (the D.C. neighborhood in which the march took place) and the destructive policies of the IMF and World Bank needs to take Capitalism 101 over again.

Georgetown was an excellent location for this march. Some unpermitted marches in D.C. have passed through essentially empty streets, framing the anticapitalist struggle as a private grudge match between anarchists and police. It made a lot more sense to be in a space full of witnesses—this not only increases the visibility of our resistance, but also ties the hands of police, who prefer not to use chemical agents in spaces crowded with civilians or brutalize protesters in full view of the liberal bourgeoisie. A busy street also offers more crowd cover for safe dispersal and escape.

POLICE CONDUCT

Wealthy liberal bystanders or no, the police had their hands tied by stronger cords—the consequences of the various lawsuits brought against them following their outrageous conduct at earlier demonstrations, including the “People's Strike” protests at the IMF/World Bank meetings

five years previous. This was a real boon to Friday's march: though several hundred police accompanied the protest, attempting to line it on both sides with motorcycle cops and trailing it with an entourage several blocks long, the police stayed away from the front of the march and did not try to penetrate its lines even when participants began throwing bricks and tearing up trash cans. Years ago, such a march would almost certainly have ended in an attempted mass arrest; this time, when the police finally moved in to cordon off the march after a full hour in the streets, they didn't even search people, instead allowing them to leave in small groups.

This hesitancy on the part of the police is a priceless gift from the ghosts of IMF protests past. It is up to current protesters to take maximum advantage of it, while not forgetting how to stage unpermitted marches without such restraint on the part of the police. If we ever become as effective as we were in 2000–2002, the police will return to their old methods no matter how much it costs them.

Many of the participants in the march were not familiar with the recent history of anarchist and police activity in D.C., and so were not equipped to predict probable police tactics. It is extremely important that people study the precedents before participating in an action—asking what has happened when people have tried similar tactics in the same place, and how things have changed since then. The October Rebellion march had a lot in common with the “Smash the State of the Union” march of 2003—and in fact the authorities used the same strategy to police both, right down to the line of motorcycles around the march, although this time they were more restrained.

The organizers of the October Rebellion would have done well to have distributed more information about the precedents for Friday's action—presuming they've been around long enough to be familiar with them. At the convergence point Friday night, around the time the march should have been getting started, many people were still milling around the periphery in small groups, afraid that they would be mass-arrested if they dared venture across the street. Can you imagine how much safer it would be for everyone if we showed up all at once at exactly the time called for and set out right then—instead of walking around for an hour, passing the same police and cameras over and over without masks on, waiting for someone else to go first?

DIVISION

The march divided into two groups, apparently following conflicts over tactics in the organizing process. Whatever factors led to this—and we are not situated to comment on them—let us note that historically, the organizers of black bloc actions have rarely displayed excellent social skills. This is a black eye for anarchists, in that it gives the erroneous impression that we engage in violent tactics because we are jerks. Ideally, those who organize the most militant actions would be the gentlest and most sensitive, so as to be best prepared to deal with the intense stress involved in such organizing and to avoid making hotheaded decisions. The better our social skills are, the more broad-based our mobilizations can be and the more effective our efforts will prove.

While some have complained that it was unfortunate that the march was split in two, this division could conceivably be regarded as a clever strategic move. Not only did it create space for participants who had different needs, it also stretched the police out over a space of several blocks, which must have further limited their capabilities. In the future it might be a good idea to

plan for two contingents from the outset: this could enable a wider range of people to participate, and avoid needless conflicts over tactics.

A rumor has reached our ears that the non-violent section of the march was identified as the “anarchafeminist” contingent. If this was intended to differentiate it from the more militant bloc, it was in markedly poor taste. The militant contingent included people of a variety of genders, and the anarchafeminist tradition has included a wide range of orientations towards violence. If a sub-group in the march organized as an explicitly anarchafeminist cluster and then decided to march separately from the rest of the group, it makes perfectly good sense that they called themselves the anarchafeminist contingent. But if a group deciding to avoid potentially violent confrontation then dubbed themselves the “anarchafeminist” group in order to make a gendered moral stance out of their decision, or others subsequently identified them as anarchafeminist on account of that decision, that is either grossly manipulative or grossly sexist. Anyway, we don’t know enough to say more than this.

ENERGY, EQUIPMENT, AND MESSAGING

The energy and enthusiasm of the participants was inspiring. Several dozen came equipped with helmets; there were enough people with shields to comprise at least one full shield wall spanning the width of the march, though it wasn’t always at the very front where it should have been. The majority of the participants seemed to be organized in affinity groups, which is essential for any militant march; most of the crowd behind the shield wall walked in lines with arms linked, like the black blocs in Germany during this past summer’s anti-G8 protests. There was a palpable difference between Friday night’s passionate chanting and the tame chants heard Monday morning during the No War, No Warming blockades: it’s one thing to mumble “Whose streets?” from the sidewalk as you watch the police drag off arrestees, another thing entirely to roar “Our streets!” from the pavement when you’re prepared to defend them.

We can’t draw conclusions about the police response described above without taking these factors into account. Rather than drawing police repression, militant preparation often discourages it—police will generally push a crowd as far as they think they can, civil liberties or no. Readiness to stand your ground will usually get you a lot further than a paper permit.

There was a little property destruction, too—the odd rock hitting a corporate window, including one belonging to Starbucks. It was nothing compared to the damage that occurred the night of the last Presidential Inauguration—but there were no police around the march that night. This time they lined the march on all sides, so it was impressive anything took place at all.

That’s the good news. But it must be said that this seemed to be a fairly new crowd—most of the participants were probably just getting involved in things like this around the time of the last Inauguration, and that’s not a lot of time to build a skill base, especially in a relatively quiet era. If the police had forcefully attacked the march rather than simply accompanying it, who knows whether the kids holding shields would have stood their ground or broken ranks and fled? Hopefully those who participated have gained enough experience and morale to be more prepared for such a situation next time. It’s one thing to look militant, but another thing entirely to deal with the terrifying situation of actual street fighting. Looking at pictures from the G8 demo on the internet is not enough to prepare you for that.

As for preparation, all the shields looked impressive, but hard banners—long, solid banners made out of wood or insulation board, such that police cannot smash them or snatch people through them—have proved more effective in practice. [Let it be said once again here that PVC pipe is NOT useful for defense, as was demonstrated most recently at the daytime march during the last Presidential Inauguration!] Police can pierce a line of kids with shields easily enough, but a solid wall of full-height hard banners is hard to penetrate, and you can't get an assault charge for holding one; several hard banners can be linked together into a jointed mobile wall to safeguard an entire crowd. Perhaps people feared it would be difficult to get such massive items past police to the departure point, but they could have been stashed early along the march route and brought into it as the crowd passed.

The lack of banners of any kind—or any kind of coherent messaging whatsoever—in the militant contingent was a real missed opportunity. A big, artfully painted banner across the front of the march would have made all the difference. We want it to be clear to everyone exactly why we're doing this, don't we? When the crowd was first gathering, lots of locals were asking what the march was about, and few people took the time to explain in detail. A couple skaters who did receive a satisfactory explanation chose to come along—let's never underestimate the importance of articulating what we're doing and why.

Finally, though the chanting was refreshingly passionate, why was there no drum corps? There was barely a five gallon drum to be seen, and only one whistle. Music helps maintain the spirits of a moving crowd; if we can't follow the Europeans in accompanying our marches with techno-blasting sound trucks, the least we can do is pull together a few percussion instruments.

TRAGEDY

A stray brick, thrown apparently without careful aim or consideration, hit a spectator in the head. She wasn't a police officer or even a heckler, just a person passing by.

This is totally unacceptable. If anything separates us from police and other terrorists, it is that we do not countenance so-called “collateral damages.” People are bound to get hurt in a revolutionary struggle, but this was utterly pointless: the fact that so few bystanders have been injured at black bloc actions in the past decade attests to this. We may throw rocks at police, but they know exactly what they are getting into—and we do so not because they deserve to be injured, but because it is necessary to defend ourselves and the freedoms for which we struggle. From a purely tactical perspective, a person who wishes to throw a brick at a corporate window should wait for an absolutely clear shot, or send a friend to clear the sidewalk (just as well-organized black blocs used to be accompanied by a person whose task was to dissuade photographers), or else aim at the endless line of police windshields behind the crowd.

Head trauma can cause long term effects that drastically impact a person's life. Let's all hope that this woman recovers completely, and that no bystanders are ever injured by projectiles from our marches again. A personal apology is in order from whomever threw that thoughtless brick; it will have to be anonymous, seeing as how we can't trust the “justice” of the state, but if accountability means anything in our circles, he or she should assume responsibility for the consequences of that poor decision.

DISPERSAL, DISPERSAL, *DISPERSAL!*

The mistake most frequently made in organizing unpermitted marches and similar actions is that insufficient attention is given to how the affair will end. Perhaps this issue was discussed in the organizing for this march, but it was impossible to tell by the results: the police eventually trapped everyone and let people out in small groups, on the condition that all disturbances cease. If we plan realistically for how our actions will end, we can conclude them on our own terms; this is safer for us, and usually avoids needless arrests. It's always better to quit while we're ahead, retaining the initiative and the sense that we control our own destiny, than to continue aimlessly until the police figure out how to shut us down. Really tight black bloc planning involves getting into the area, going through the target zone, and getting the entire group to a place where everyone can disperse safely.

After the march disbanded, it was distressing to see many people nonchalantly walking down the street blocks away with their masks and gear still on. This may be safe enough in D.C. right now, but in just about every other time and place the rule is that masked individuals away from the main bloc are ruthlessly targeted by police. Those who cut their black bloc teeth in D.C. last Friday should not expect things to be so easy ever again. One of the essential challenges of participating in a black bloc is transitioning in and out of your gear quickly, out of sight of police and cameras, without spending any more time than necessary running around by yourself in a sketchy outfit.

PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

Contrary to post-9/11 alarmism, it's still possible to pull off militant unpermitted marches. In fact, as the effects of police misconduct during the last round of mass actions set in and the pendulum swings back to the Left in parts of the US, it may be more possible than ever.

SDS, whatever some say about it, offers a concrete convergence point for young people to get involved in revolutionary struggle; the networks it offers appear to be catalyzing new organizing efforts. This bodes well for 2008. Hopefully the SDS groups scattered across the nation will inspire non-affiliated anarchists to form their own affinity groups, so organizational structures will already be in place when radicals come together next summer for direct action at the Democratic and Republican National Conventions.

Finally, it was notable that very few of the participants in this march were involved in the black blocs that took place around the turn of the century. That's bad news in that it suggests either a high turnover rate in participants or a poor rapport between longtime activists and this new generation... but we could look at it as good news, as well. Imagine if all the people on the East coast who were involved in black blocs seven or even three years ago had turned out for this one—it would have been huge, and the results would have been truly unpredictable! If the latest wave of radicals can establish bonds with the alumni of earlier generations, the results will be historic. That's a big challenge, and a big opportunity, for this coming year.

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