

The Ghost of Mayday Past

Looking back on the Dublin EU summit protests – Mayday 2004

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Compared to many other European countries May Day demonstrations have always been small in Ireland, even in the 1980's when the Stalinist left was much more influential and the unions were much more powerful. By the mid-1990's, with the old left in complete disarray and the union bureaucrats more focussed on partnership with the state and the bosses rather than workers' rights, May Day had become a fairly underwhelming event.

A brief history of troublemaking

So, given this dismal tradition why were the explicitly libertarian May Day events in 2004, comparatively speaking, such a success? Of course there was the impetus of a major European Union summit but to understand why anarchists were in a position to organise big May Day events calls for a brief examination of the development of libertarian ideas and practices in Ireland over the past few years.

Obviously, part of the story is the general realignment of the radical left in the wake of the collapse of Stalinism and the subsequent growth of interest in the anarchist alternative. A lot of this can be attributed to the anarchist involvement in the burgeoning anti-capitalist movement. Like countless others across the world the Zapatista rebellion and the massive protests against the institutions of global capitalism have inspired, bolstered and strongly influenced Irish anarchism. The central themes of the alternative globalisation movement echo and develop ideas that are central to, or complementary to those of anarchism: the practice of direct democracy, the use of direct action, a genuine internationalism, network building, a distrust of politicians and wannabe politicians. Gradually, many of these ideas and practices have permeated beyond anarchism into broader activist circles and these ideas and the dynamism of anti-capitalism has drawn a swathe of new people into political agitation.

Dublin's May Day 2004 was to a large extent the product of this movement with its new models of protest. It is no coincidence that a large number of the activists involved in organising May Day have travelled abroad to various counter-summits, encuentros¹ and conferences; and taken part in the central debates and many of the struggles that have shaped the anarchist part of the alternative globalisation movement. In Dublin the enthusiasm and energy generated by these developments and the appearance of a new generation of libertarians was strengthened by the presence of a small but consistently hardworking group of anarchists active in various campaigns in the city for the past two decades.

The Alphabet soup war: GG, GNAW, DGN vs. SWP

It was activists influenced by Zapatista solidarity work, radical ecology and anti-capitalism who organised the first Grassroots Gathering in 2001. This initiative was, in retrospect, one of the most important taken by Irish libertarians in the past few years. Since 2001 the Gathering has been held two or three times a year providing a discussion forum for libertarian activists who want to network and share experiences and analyses. These events, which attracted hundreds of activists from various backgrounds and non-authoritarian political tendencies, galvanised the libertarian left and played a very important role in spreading anarchist ideas and the emergence of

¹ International gatherings hosted by the Mexican Zapatista rebels.

new forms of campaigning. It is probably not an exaggeration to say that without the Gatherings it is unlikely that there would have been any large-scale anti-authoritarian protests.

The Gatherings do not function as decision-making bodies but they have given birth to a number of practical initiatives and activist groups. Probably the most significant of these was the Grassroots Network Against War (GNAW), which from 2002 on sought to create a libertarian pole of activity within the anti-war movement. This was separate from the Socialist Workers Party dominated Irish Anti-War Movement who were, in practical terms, trying to ignore the US refuelling at Shannon and who opposed the use of direct action against the war. Simultaneously, a number of punks and anarchist squatters started to make an impact on anti-war events with Ireland's first black bloc actions². These activities met with varying levels of success but for the first time in radical politics in Ireland there was a well-publicised and clearly identifiable libertarian presence on the streets.

So between 2002 and 2004 it was becoming clear that a series of overlapping and interlinked groups and individuals, largely within the orbit of the Grassroots Gatherings, could fruitfully work together on a range of issues. This fuelled a growing sense of confidence and ambition amongst libertarians and in July 2003 at a Gathering in Dublin plans were laid to organise a demonstration against the World Economic Forum³ meeting in Dublin in October. Grassroots activists, in collaboration with the Irish Social Forum⁴, planned to disrupt the summit. When it was announced that the WEF meeting was cancelled the same activists who later established the Dublin Grassroots Network (DGN) started planning for May Day.

24-hour party people-RTS and Indymedia

Before discussing the planning of Mayday in more detail it is worth mentioning two other important factors in the run up to the first of May 2004 – RTS and Indymedia especially as many of the people who ended up in DGN were or are also involved in RTS and/or Indymedia.

The first couple of RTS street parties in Dublin were fairly small affairs but over a couple years these events started to attract more people. In 2002 there was a Mayday RTS along the banks of the Liffey. Hundreds of people came to dance, chat and drink in the holiday sunshine. As the RTS was finishing the partygoers were viciously batonned off the street. The cops were quick to claim that these unprovoked assaults was their response to a completely fictional anti-capitalist Mayday riot akin, they said, to events in London the previous year. The media ran with this until Indymedia footage of the boys in blue in action radically changed the way the story was covered. In general the role of Indymedia Ireland in promoting non-authoritarian radical politics cannot be underestimated but the work done by Indymedia correspondents and editors at this time was invaluable both for vindicating the assaulted protestors and for raising the profile of libertarian dissent. Mayday 2002 put Indymedia and anti-capitalist protest on the front pages and the event remains firmly lodged in the minds of most Irish people as symptomatic of increasingly aggressive and untrustworthy policing policies and the emergence of a new type of protest.

² For a discussion of the 'black bloc' tactic see Red & Black Revolution numbers 6 and 7, www.struggle.ws/wsm/rbr.html

³ The WEF is a pro-privatisation body which 'represents the world's 1,000 leading companies'. A think tank and lobby group for the super-rich.

⁴ The ISF describes itself as 'a gathering for everyone opposed to war, racism and the implications of corporatized globalisation or neo-liberalism'. www.irishsocialforum.org

The following year there was another well-attended Mayday RTS in the city centre that passed off without any police violence. This further established Mayday in the public mind as, at least partially, a day of libertarian protest and these chaotic, joyful and defiant street parties had a marked influence on the type and nature of events organised over the Mayday weekend in 2004.

Organising May Day

Informal discussion of a May Day protest against EU policies began in mid-2003. At the Grass-roots Gathering in Galway in November 2003 plans were discussed in a more structured way. Although a lot of the important details remained vague, working groups were set up that envisaged a May Day closely modelled on previous international summit protests with the aim of either shutting down the bigwigs shindig – or at least disrupting it – and using this as an opportunity to put forward our vision of an alternative Europe.

The pace of activity picked up in the New Year as Ireland assumed the EU presidency.

For the next five months there were regular meetings of the newly formed DGN to discuss what we wanted to do and to begin the practical organisational work for the protest. From quite early on in this process DGN decided that one of our most important priorities was to devise events and actions that would have popular appeal and allow for mass participation. What emerged over the next couple of months was an ambitious four-day timetable of events that was themed as a ‘No Borders’ weekend. The SWP led coalition ‘Another Europe is Possible’ also announced that it was going to hold some type of protest over the same weekend but based on our previous experience of SWP fronts we thought it wise to continue our plans separately and discuss possible coordination in the future.

At these meetings considerable time and thought was given to how we might get our message across effectively to people outside of the small libertarian scene and the traditional left. Despite a fairly small group of activists and very limited resources, it was decided to print fifty thousand leaflets explaining our opposition to the EU – one of the biggest print runs of any libertarian propaganda ever undertaken in Ireland.

We wanted to ensure that we couldn’t be simply written off or easily marginalised. This was of particular concern because historically the EU has enjoyed widespread popular support in Ireland both as a cash cow for infrastructural projects and various subsidies and by parts of the left as the harbinger of progressive social legislation.

We also wanted to clearly distinguish ourselves from the rather unappealing coalition of nationalists, rabid pro-lifers, racists and other loons who have traditionally opposed the project of European integration in Ireland. So in the final version of the leaflet we were careful to stress that we welcomed the admission of the people of these countries into the EU per se but that we objected to the neo-liberal policies of an EU run by bosses and multinationals that was intent on the privatisation of public services and tightening border controls. DGN was conscious that lefty whingeing and outrage on its own doesn’t often inspire people so the leaflet also tied to outline a positive and constructive alternative to the bosses’ Europe. When the leaflets were finally printed up we started distributing them in the city centre and in housing estates around Dublin, and to a lesser extent in other Irish cities. In addition, thousands of flyers, stickers and posters were printed up and plastered all over the city.

As part of the effort to go beyond the ‘usual suspects’ activists made contact with refugee groups, the anti bin-tax campaign that was opposing the imposition of neo-liberal service taxes and other campaigns and groups. An international call out to libertarians was also sent out. By February it was clear that a number of English groups were going to respond to the call, the most organised of which was the W.O.M.B.L.E.S who held several meetings in London in preparation for May Day and travelled over for the Grassroots Gathering in Cork in early March in order to network with Irish activists.

Don’t believe the hype- mayday and media

By February we had already garnered some sensationalist and deeply dishonest coverage of our plans but I don’t think any of us could have predicted the extent of the eventual media scare campaign. Over the next two months there were a blizzard of articles in which the word violence was to appear with ever increasing frequency and less and less meaning or context in newspapers and in TV and radio studios. This non-issue was seized upon by every hack with a laptop-who knocked out one or another version of the standard article about the threat of violent and mindless anarchists arriving to sack the city and Dubliners were duly promised everything from a twenty thousand strong anarchist army to gas attacks.

To counter this smear campaign DGN created a group of media spokespeople. Their unstinting and consistently intelligent efforts to take the media on at their own game and get our message to the general public enjoyed a good measure of success. Closer to Mayday the work of the media group pushed some reporters to question some of the more ludicrous stories being circulated. Their work was complemented and strengthened by the efforts of Indymedia Ireland in the months before Mayday. In the week before the protests Ireland’s first Indymedia centre was opened up in Dublin’s inner city providing alternative media, including the DGN media group, an all important base and a platform to work from. It is likely that these media activists prevented the wholesale criminalisation of the Mayday protests. Also, rather paradoxically, the coverage generated interest in Mayday- giving us the sense that we were at the centre of something important and exciting.

Nonetheless, the issue of violence was the only thing consistently discussed in the mainstream media and to an extent we ended up being shaped by the lurid fantasies of journalists; fantasies that had no bearing on our politics or our plans. The media group fought and won a battle for DGN but inevitably the nature and the form of the battle was determined by the mainstream media. In the media hall of mirrors all the focus remained almost exclusively on the potential for violence during the protests rather than on the effects of neoliberalism and in the end, I believe, that we began to internalise and, at least in part, respond to this media driven agenda

Enter the cop mob

In the run up to May Day the police mounted an unprecedented security operation and media offensive of their own, and their efforts played a massive role in determining what happened over May Day. There was talk of mass arrests and specially trained riot squads. A well-known Garda representative opined that the police should have guns to confront the protestors. In the couple weeks before May Day things became really ridiculous with the police regularly harassing ac-

tivists for simply distributing leaflets or fly posting as well as mounting an intensive surveillance operation.

In the couple of days before May Day over three thousand extra cops were drafted into the city and Irish troops were deployed and billeted near Farmleigh house, where the EU leaders would be banqueting on May 1st. The police's new anti-riot toys — water cannon borrowed from the PSNI — were trundled out in front of the media who reported the whole farce in tones of breathless excitement. The police stated in august and serious manner that they were now ready to defend the great and good against the much anticipated horde of international anarchists. More seriously for the protest organisers, though, was the discovery and closing by the cops of the planned accommodation/convergence centre in a recently squatted derelict house. Worse still, three English anarchists were arrested nearby and held in custody on trespass charges. The cops then further upped the ante by raiding the homes of two anarchists. This carnival of reaction provided even further testament, for those who needed it, to the boundless vanity of Irish politicians, the craven servility of most of the media and the ability of senior police to talk unmitigated shite.

The arrests and the loss of the convergence centre was to bedevil us over the following days, with many of the international anarchists far from impressed with the set up or DGN's tactical choices. In turn, the attitude and approach of some of the visitors didn't exactly enamour some of the internationals to DGNers. These conflicts over tactics, infrastructure and how to deal with corporate media brings into sharp focus a lot of the more important issues thrown up during May Day and this is discussed more fully in the longer version of this article.

Here comes the weekend

The weekend began with a small demonstration in support of the English arrestees in custody at Mountjoy jail. The first billed event — the Critical Mass cycle — put fears that people would have been too intimidated to take to the streets, to rest as 600 people turned up on the Friday evening.

Early the next day a worryingly small group, even given the tardiness of some Irish anarchists, witnessed a series of street theatre pieces against Fortress Europe. The police on the other hand had no problem getting up early and police lines and crowd control barriers were in place all over the city while vans full of riot police criss-crossed the city and a surveillance helicopter followed us overhead. On top of this, the cops had, without warning, imposed a de facto ban on the planned Saturday evening protest by declaring our long publicised meeting point for the Bring the Noise march a no go area. All the same the mood and numbers picked up as we finished our No Borders protest and we gathered to 'Reclaim the City'.

Take over the city

Reclaiming the city consisted of a circuitous, RTS-style⁵ wander around the city centre. This moving carnival briefly halted as activists dropped a huge banner about the housing crisis from the roof of a recently evicted squat. This was followed by a mass break-in at a privately owned

⁵ Reclaim The Streets want fewer cars and more public transport in cities. Have blocked off streets and held parties many times, both in Ireland and abroad. To confuse the cops they begin with a march which suddenly stops, a sound system comes out and the party kicks off

park in one of the posher areas of the city centre. Thousands of picnicking anarchists enjoyed the sun, chatted, listened to live music and old 78s on a wind-up gramophone — temporarily returning the beautifully appointed Fitzwilliam Park to the commons. Then we crossed the city to blockade a Top Oil petrol station as this company has been helping refuel US planes on their way to Iraq. Because this had been a regular target of Irish anarchists the cops had pre-empted us and when we arrived there was a solid line of police guarding the forecourt, resulting in a far more effective and hassle free shut-down that we could have hoped for.

Bring the noise

As we made our way to the hastily chosen alternative meeting up point for the ‘Bring the Noise’ march it was clear, despite our worst fears, that a sense of momentum and excitement had built up over the previous week and the day was going to be a success. All along Dublin’s main street the cops were guarding the banks and the crappy fast-food outlets but in the middle there was a crowd of thousands. People continued to flock towards the march, including people from the ‘Another Europe is Possible’ rally that had finished some time earlier. Impromptu speeches began. As the crowd of about 3,000 moved off the chants and shouts grew to a crescendo and as we passed through the inner city the protest swelled to about 4,000 people. The sense of resolve, spontaneous revolt and joy was infectious and to music, foghorns, whistles and roars we marched for over an hour towards the banquet centre.

Many of us were surprised that the march got as far as it did but as we came within half a kilometre of Farmleigh house at the Ashtown roundabout we saw the police lines. We came to a halt eighty metres in front of the cops and water cannons. The end of the march was announced and the largely masked up ‘pushing bloc’ came forward with arms linked and approached the police lines accompanied by a sizeable number of protestors from the DGN march and the odd pisshead. After some pushing and the throwing of a few fairly ineffective missiles like half empty cans and plastic bottles, the riot police replaced the uniformed Gardai and there were a number of baton charges. At this point one uniformed policewoman was taken to hospital with a superficial head injury. The ‘pushing bloc’ was broken up and there were a number of scuffles.

Then came the moment the hacks, the senior cops and perhaps even a few of protestors had been waiting for — the water cannon were deployed. After spraying the protestors there were some more scuffles. This prompted an ill-advised sit down protest by a handful of people and some wonderfully surreal antics involving dancing protestors and a large bearded man scooping up some of the water being sprayed by the water cannon and throwing it back at the tender. The police, not known for enjoying gentle mockery, moved forward at this point and they began to aggressively push the protestors back down the Navan Road. After the fracas at Ashtown Gate the police had broken an arm, sprained an ankle, cracked several heads and inflicted numerous other minor injuries on marchers and arrested 28 of them. This was the ‘May Day riot’ that was on all the front pages the next day and although we had spent four days on Dublin’s streets engaged in various forms of protest none of this existed as far as the media were concerned. There had been a ‘riot’ in which the only serious injuries were sustained by demonstrators.

No borders-no protestors

Early the next day a couple dozen people made their way out to an accommodation centre for asylum seekers north of Dublin as a small gesture of solidarity. Monday began with another solidarity demo for the arrestees which was followed by the last May Day event — a city centre RTS. After some huffing and puffing by the Gardai around one of the sound systems the party kicked off and the paranoia, stress and tension were danced away in a celebration of freedom and resistance well into the evening.

Party for your right to fight

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Aftermath — Protest and criminalisation

Of the twenty-eight people arrested after the disturbances at Ashtown Gate twelve were held in custody without bail after a special sitting of the courts. Just as with the English anarchists charged with trespass in the run up to May Day the courts acted with perhaps unprecedented severity treating very minor charges with great seriousness. Many of the May Day cases are still waiting to be heard but it has become clear from some of the cases that have come before the courts that the judiciary and the cops are continuing to deal with May Day defendants with great zeal and unusual severity. The intention behind this is twofold: it retrospectively justifies the absurdly large police mobilisation on May Day and it sends out a message to anyone thinking of questioning the status quo in the future. The charges against the English anarchists were summarily dismissed when, six months later, the court finally heard their case. The judge really had no option but to do this as the police case against them was almost amusingly shoddy. Nonetheless, the state got their pound of flesh; due to punitive bail conditions they had to put their lives on hold for nearly six months living away from home separated from friends, family and comrades.

The criminalisation of protest is a European wide phenomenon, and intimidation of this sort is to be expected even in response to mildly confrontational protest. Nevertheless, such consequences demand a sober and dry-eyed assessment of what was really achieved by May Day.

So was it worth it?

In the immediate aftermath most of the 60 or so people in DGN who had a hand in organising the events felt exhausted but exhilarated that we had pulled off such an ambitious programme with little more than enthusiasm, hard work and a couple of thousand euro. The protests reinvigorated May Day and were a milestone in libertarian activity in Ireland. It is also undoubtedly true that through Indymedia, DGN leaflets and the DGN media group's work innumerable people were exposed to anarchist ideas for the first time and this has led to a partial shift in the public

perception of anarchism, from an obscure and pointlessly nihilistic philosophy to an active and combative movement for social change.

It is also worth reiterating that one of the real strengths of May Day was that the public heard arguments against the European superstate on the basis of a positive vision of the future rather than the worship of an idealised and romanticised past. These achievements are even more impressive if one takes into consideration the fact that unlike many other European countries 'civil society' in Ireland, as represented by NGO's, the trade union movement, community workers and the like has yet to be genuinely mobilised by the demands of the alternative globalisation movement. It goes without saying that without this sort of support it is more difficult, in terms of infrastructure and resources, to mount a weekend of protests.

It is impossible at this point to measure the long-term impact of these events but it is clear that the experience of May Day has consolidated the small but significant gains made by libertarians in Ireland over the past decade. May Day has bound the small anti-authoritarian community more closely together and confirmed that we can work together collectively and have an impact. This sense of hope and confidence is reflected in a range of ongoing activities; work on setting up social centres, preparations for the G8 summit in Scotland, a new anarchist bookshop in Dublin, benefits, meetings and various political campaigns, and also in the fact that anarchist groups such as the Workers Solidarity Movement have seen a rise in membership.

I think the other most immediate gain is that May Day (and the activity of GNAW that preceded it) put anti-authoritarian ideas at heart of anti-capitalist activity in Ireland and created space for new forms of struggle. Of particular importance is the emphasis on non-hierarchical organisation, direct action and support for a diversity of tactics amongst anti-capitalists. On a more subjective and ephemeral level the distinctive atmosphere of May Day is also worth mentioning because May Day was more than anything an empowering and defiant carnival and that may be one of its most enduring contributions to protest culture in Ireland. All of this doesn't really mean that much in the short term as anti-capitalism is a very small tendency in Ireland. But if these ideas are to thrive we will need a genuine diversity of tactics – something that was impossible until we loosened the cold and rigid grasp of Trotskyism on the political expression of dissent. With continued hard work we can begin to influence major political campaigns and social movements ensuring that direct democracy and direct action remain become an integral part of protest in Ireland.

Towards a conclusion: May Day in context

May Day was imagined and planned in a similar way to hundreds of other anti-capitalist events around the world, and this links DGN to a global movement for radical change. But what does that mean in an Irish context? Anti-capitalism as a set of hopes, values, ideas and practices has been successful in creating a space for anarchism but nonetheless, as I have said, at the moment Irish anti-capitalism remains marginal; a movement in embryo that has only the shallowest of roots in workplace and community struggles. May Day 2004 was bigger than we expected but it was not the expression of a mass movement of any sort. For instance it was noticeable that over the weekend that we failed to attract significant numbers of Irish workers threatened by neo-liberal policies. They may well have been there at the march but they were not there in an organised fashion.

In contrast, in Genoa part of the Irish contingent was a group of bus drivers against privatisation with their own banner. It is a small and telling detail that these workers or others in a similar situation didn't do the same in Dublin. Similarly, the weekend didn't include any action in support of the non-payment of waste charges introduced as part of the neo-liberal agenda of privatising public services. This was discussed and several attempts were made to see this happen but because libertarians were a minority within a campaign dominated at a central committee level by Trotskyists these attempts came to nought.

Finally, our No Borders weekend was not backed or attended by any organised immigrant groups. Clearly, we are currently far from being a 'movement of movements'. To change this and create broader networks will need patient, assiduous campaigning and increased levels of organisation on the libertarian left. It will, I believe, also demand greater ambition and much more sophisticated strategic thinking on our part. May Day was a whispered threat, a promise to the future, a party for the sake of a party, an example of direct democracy in action but in the end only a very small beginning.

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