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Non-violent action: Direct and “direct”

Melbourne Anarchist Communist Group

14 March 2019

As more people realise that climate change is happening, and there's no mainstream political call to stop it, they are starting to look beyond conventional political tactics. Writing to politicians, canvassing for votes and having a protest march from A to B won't cut it. The peace and environment movements have a long tradition of adopting Non-Violent Direct Action (NVDA) when other tactics fail, without clarifying just what this means.

It is generally agreed that NVDA attempts to achieve aims by peacefully taking action that either directly reaches the goals or blocks the government or corporation from conducting business-as-usual (BAU). These are very effective tactics. Indeed, it can be seen that a strike is a primary example. Workers withdraw their labour and refuse to conduct BAU until the boss makes an adequate offer. Direct action gets the goods.

In practice, though, there is more to NVDA than meets the eye. While the peace and environment movements in Australia are almost totally united in supporting this approach, there has

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been much debate around how to go about it. Big campaigns over the Franklin Dam in the 1980s and Jabiluka in the 1990s were riven by conflicts over this issue. With the climate movement gearing up to wage an NVDA campaign to #StopAdani, the MACG believes it's important to understand NVDA a little better.

Sometimes NVDA really is what it says on the tin. People come together to take action that achieves their goals directly. On other occasions, however, what occurs is Non-Violent "Direct" Action. The participants go through the forms of Direct Action, without the substance. The action is symbolic and the intent is to achieve its aims indirectly, through traditional channels.

Though many examples of such "Direct" Action have occurred in Australia, it is best illustrated by a particularly egregious case in the United States. Democracy Spring is a progressive organisation in the US trying to improve voting rights and limit the ability of rich people to use their money to influence elections – worthy objectives, but very limited ones. In April 2016, this organisation conducted a march from Philadelphia to Washington DC, culminating in a blockade of the Capitol Building, the Parliament House in the US. Over the course of a week, more than 900 people were arrested. An impressive display of Direct Action, it appeared.

Appearances, though, were deceiving. The "blockade" of the Capitol was a highly choreographed affair, conducted in close co-operation with the police. There was no serious attempt to impede access to the building. The arrestees were not even charged, something which would have clogged up the courts. Instead, they were released after paying \$50 each to a fund that goes to the Washington DC police. This was "Direct" Action as a mere ritual, a symbol of determination, with the real objective of getting TV coverage that mentioned "a record number of arrests". It was a media strategy based upon deception.

The difference between NVDA and NV“D”A is usually apparent in the media strategy. In Direct Action, the primary function of the media strategy is to draw more people into the action and to deter State violence. In “Direct” Action, its primary function is to generate mass media attention that affects the mainstream political process. Direct Action empowers the participants, while “Direct” Action treats them as a stage army, to be wheeled on and off according to the judgment of the leadership.

The difference between Direct Action and “Direct” Action can also be seen in their very different treatment by the police. Police in liberal democracies are often quite willing to collaborate with “Direct” Action as a symbolic spectacle, provided everything is negotiated properly beforehand and it is understood that there is no actual attempt to prevent BAU. The police are almost always very hostile to Direct Action. They are the armed thugs of the State and their job is to uphold an unjust social order. Direct Action puts the State in the position of either being forced to concede, or to use police violence to defeat the movement. The larger the Direct Action is, the more violence the State would require and the more it would be discredited by its response, sparking wider resistance. It is thus a challenge to the State, something no police force can tolerate.

Now that Adani have announced they intend to build their coal mine and railway line without borrowing from the banks, the probability of it actually starting work has increased. If the climate movement wants to #StopAdani, it will have to defeat the opposition of the Queensland Government. NVDA will be called for. The movement needs to be clear, though, that “Direct” Action is different from Direct Action.

When a government is firmly in the pocket of the mining companies, it will not be swayed by a few weeks of TV stories showing pictures of people passively sitting and waiting to be taken away by the cops. What is required is a movement that knows the police are the attack dogs of the enemy and

they are to be resisted with all the strength and intelligence we can muster. We need a movement that wants to #StopAdani directly, a movement that will create facts on the ground that the Government cannot ignore. And this movement, in challenging the State, will inevitably look beyond it, to a new society with no State and no cops, and where capitalism is no more.