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Dispatches from France Three

Nantes Manifestación 6/2/16, A Fateful Resonance,
Lines of Graffiti

Paul Z. Simons

June 12th, 2016

“Dans la rue avec la CGT on fout le zbeul”
 (“In the streets with the CGT fucking things up”)
 –Graffiti 06/02/16 Nantes

El Errante

Nantes, Pays de la Loire. Another day. Another manif against the Loi du Travail. This time, Nantes. I had wanted to see Nantes; it is near the ZAD and had been the scene of some of the more furious riots over the past months. Some of the video of the action shows the torching of a Porsche, black bloc versus CRS clubfests, and the arrest of dozens of protestors. Indeed, of those protestors held on house arrest as of 06/02/16 nationwide, the vast majority were residents from the area in and around Nantes. There are a number of reasons for this, the city saw a unique upswing in student revolutionary activity in the late sixties of sufficient size to warrant a trip to the city by Vaneigem to see what, in fact, was happening. The Nantes unions had declared for a Commune which lasted from 23

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May to 12 June 1968 during this time the town hall was occupied by a joint strike committee of workers and peasants. This insurrectionary activity has continued to the present and the resonance between the ZAD, and the nearest large city, Nantes, is clear.

I arrived in Nantes on the Sunday prior to the event and had been told about the progress of the planning for the manif. It was pointed out to me that the folks involved in logistics had a very hard time in Nantes estimating how many folks will attend any given demo. As an example at one of the pro-ZAD manif in 2013, the expected 5,000 attendees was vastly underestimated, and most observers put the final census at a whopping 20,000 protestors. Planning therefore, and flexibility, are important. The date was set for June second at 10am, all the unions would attend, as would other interested parties — and basically any radical anywhere close to Nantes, who heard the call-out, marked their calendar. I went to the demo with a number of local anarchists and a member of the Federation Anarchiste from Paris. The turn out proved to be less than huge, perhaps 2 to 3,000 — tops. Yet there was a significant number of black bloc folks there, and also a good turnout of the local anarchist community. Who were missing were the police, CRS, and the assorted forces of law and disorder. They were nowhere to be seen, which I counted as odd. The march began with the union folks starting off followed by the black bloc and radicals who quickly moved to the front. The first turn was to lead to the local prefecture, essentially the executive of the large county-like structures that functions as a middling level in the hyper-centralized French state, and the police prefecture, no explanation needed and finally into the heart of Nantes. We were supposed to walk across a bridge that spans the Erdre river, a small tributary of the Loire, but it was blocked by hordes of cops, riot vehicles, all standing behind an impressive mesh steel fence reaching to the bridges upper structure. The black bloc went to work throwing bottles filled with paint and some irregular objects. But with the steel fence blocking projectiles there was little that the black bloc could do so the tactical decision to con-

L'imagination a pouvoir

The imagination fulfilled
(a twist on the May '68 Situationist slogan, "All Power to the Imagination")

Vive le Vandalisme

Long Live Vandalism
(in the original, Vandalism is misspelled...deliberately?)

tinue and ignore this first technical victory by the police was taken. By now the unions, led by the reformist CGT, had passed around the black bloc and continued to march to — God knows where. The stated goals of the march, the prefecture, the prefecture of police, the town hall and the train station now seemed out of reach. Undeterred the black bloc regrouped, a graffiti bombardment began (more on this later), and quickly sought to regain the lead position in the march. I stood in the back and watched as a virtual horde of black clad warriors moved quickly past the unionists by sticking to the sidewalk. It looked like a march of black ants climbing a non-descript multi-colored tree or wall. As they attained the front there was a brief halt as CGT marshals tried to get the black to bloc to turn around. They said if they tried to move into the town center, which was the general direction they were headed, that they would all get their asses kicked. The black bloc was not impressed and after some debate and a moment's hesitation moved off. As I walked in the black bloc the FA comrade beside me looked back and said, "Good, the CGT is following."

One thing the black bloc had brought to the march was new to me, a sound system, a good, loud, fucking sound system. Which they used to blast alternating dubstep, détourned revolutionary songs, French classics and pop. As we marched we saw a number of cops running in our direction from a side street, as they did the sound system blasted the last minute or so of MIA's Paper Planes, which includes the chorus of, "All I want to do is (four loud gunshots) and take your money." The song stopped the bloc and most turned and faced the advancing police as they mimed the gunshots by pointing their fingers at the cops and imitating the motion of firing a pistol and then loudly sang the final line. The faces of the police as a few hundred finger pistols shot at them was classic; a mix of horror, anger, and something else...fear maybe, or vengeance. The song ended, and the march continued. It was pure political street theater, and a scene I'll likely not forget.

We moved past the town hall, an ugly office like affair, which suffered greatly in smashed windows and loads of graffiti. Moving past the building brought the black bloc into a small open square, which revealed a line of CRS facing their right flank. Barely had I made the open square when the sound of dull thuds sounded and multiple canisters of CS gas poured down on us. The handkerchief came out and I wrapped it around my face. There was little to do but move fast past the spreading shadow of the teargas. The black bloc decided not to stand and fight in the tight streets and moved quickly down and onto the central plaza, and the final destination – the train station.

There was an impromptu march by the assorted radicals after the termination of the original march. We followed this march for about a mile. It was gassed twice and the CRS finally moved in to disperse it along with the most fearsome element of French law enforcement, the BAC (Brigade Anti-Criminalité). The BAC are units of physically fit lunatics whose job is to move in and arrest demonstrators, when there are no manifs to harass, they turn on drug dealers – and in Marseilles at least, steal their drugs and sell them or use them. The Marseilles BAC was fired to a man in a massive corruption case that included drug seizure, sales, intimidation, etc. In the black bloc the BAC are loathed and everyone seems to have their own favorite BAC story of abuse and degradation. The folks I attended the manif with decided that the march was ending and so we moved off. At the same moment there was a sound of tear gas being fired and the entire remnant of the demonstrators turned the corner that we had left them at, and came running straight for us. As it happened the FA comrade smiled and said, “The hardest thing is leaving a manif. Sometimes it follows you...”

The next day I retraced the route of the march to get some photos of the graffiti that had gone up. It varied greatly, alternately ironic, chiding, demanding, and funny. It's only common characteristic was a knife-edge of provocation and subversion. I include some of the standouts with translations and explanations where necessary.

Dans la rue avec la CGT on fout le zbeul

In the streets with the CGT fucking things up

[A double meaning. 1) The black bloc chiding the CGT as reformist and pacific and 2) An invitation to the CGT to join the bloc to make things better. Note also the extreme slang of “fucking things up” (on fout le zbeul)]

2017: les urnes en miettes

2017: ballot boxes in pieces

(2017 is the next national election in France)

Nik la BAC

Fuck the BAC

l'action est le soeur du reve

action is the sister of dream

Le Rage et le swag

The Rage and the swagger

l'emeute embellit ma ville—Johanna Rolland

riot embellishes my city—Johanna Rolland

(Rolland is the mayor of Nantes)

Nantes, l'emeute au naturel

Nantes, all natural (organic?) riot