

November 20, 2001

Report from Ottawa

By Starhawk

We're done with three days of actions here against the meetings of the IMF, the World Bank, and the G20. All in all, they went well, especially considering the organizers had only three weeks notice to pull together a mobilization.

The organizers of this action took some big risks. First, attempting to call an action on such short notice was extremely difficult. Nevertheless, they mobilized probably 3-5000 people for three days of events.

Secondly, they explicitly invited all factions to sit down at the table and coordinated events to attempt to leave space for both committed nonviolent actions and actions that support a diversity of tactics. This process wasn't always smooth, but overall the result was a deepened level of trust between many groups in the movement.

Friday, OCAT, the Ontario Coalition Against Tories, CLAC, the Anti-Capitalist Convergence of Montreal, and the Black Toota of Toronto held a rally at which I spoke, and then a snake march through downtown Ottawa. The snake march was fast and spirited: the idea was to keep moving, avoid confrontations with the police, and disrupt downtown. A small contingent of the Living River cluster marched, but most people had not yet arrived and we peeled off before the end. After we left, a few people broke windows at a McDonald's and tore down an anti-choice sign. This was the only real property damage that occurred during the weekend.

At the same time, a peace vigil was held at the Human Rights Memorial near Ottawa courthouse and City Hall. The original plan was to hold Muslim prayers and then return to the University to break the fast of Ramadan. However, the police threw some kind of chemical weapon projectile into the crowd and attempted to snatch a protestor out of it. Others, Muslim and non-Muslim, joined the snake march, which had merged with the rally and now took off again through the darkening streets.

On Friday night, we held a ritual for around a hundred and fifty people. We created a well out of a child's swimming pool, and filled it with waters of the world. Telling stories of loss, of where we get our strength, and of what we give, we exchanged stones and finally placed them in the well. We stirred it,

spiral danced around it, and raised a cone of power to charge our visions, then each took a stone from the well. It was sweet and beautiful.

On Saturday, we gather at LeBretton flats to march in the Peace March. Our cluster, a group of Pagans, became the Living River, bringing blue cloth, signs and flyers to focus attention on issues of water. The IMF and the World Bank include the privatization of water delivery services in the structural adjustment programs they impose on the third world. With privatization, the costs of drinking water rise beyond the ability of the poor to pay. Water, as a crucial resource, is in shorter and shorter supply, and within the next decades many places will be facing shortages. The control of water resources may soon be as hot a political issue as the control of oil.

The River had a good contingent, probably sixty people, together with the Mothers and Midwives. Betty Ann, who had graciously provided a number of us with food, lodging, transport, jail and legal support throughout the week during our troubles with Canadian Immigration, brought The Baby—a giant stocking doll that looks like newborn baby with an umbilical cord of knotted nylons attached to a giant helium balloon of the Earth.

A contingent of the black bloc had come to support the march. We all started off together, marching in perfect peace and harmony until out of nowhere a contingent of riot cops in full gear set up a turnstile roadblock. They were spread out across the road and the march was required to walk between them, while snatch teams picked out individuals to be searched or arrested. We knew they would be targeting the black bloc, who as we said had been doing nothing other than peacefully marching, so we mingled them amongst the River. The cops ran in and grabbed a young man, pulling him out of the flow and throwing him to the ground. The march broke down. People were screaming and cops were snatching kids and crushing them on the pavement while more police dogs than I've ever seen were snarling and lunging. Mothers with babies in strollers were frantically trying to get away. Maude Barlow, head of the Council of Canadians, said later that she was screaming in fear. On the side, the cops were holding a group of the bloc at bay, menacing them and others with snarling police dogs. A few of us jumped in between to protect the bloc and confront the police. "Your dog bit me!" a man next to me was crying. One man was on the ground, being attacked by a dog who bit him nearly down to the bone. The level of sheer, uncalled-for repression united everyone. As Betty Ann said, "When the dogs bit The Baby, it confirmed my solidarity with the black bloc."

While a couple of us kept the attention of the cops in front, Lisa and some others found an opening and pulled the bloc through and back into the body of the march. We quickly moved on.

The bloc was thanking us as we moved away. On the move, we organized the River to surround them and keep them away from the edges of the March where they could be easily snatched. Further along, the police again tried to split the march. The River had the bloc well protected on one side, but on the opposite side our ranks were thin. The police ran in to attempt to grab the bloc, and from the other side cops came in to push the rest of the march back. They drove a line across the road, pushing our contingent, the back end with bloc and Pagans and others all mingled, away from the main body of the march. Riot cops on the side had the dogs which were menacing people. Our line was in formation, chanting "Move! Move!" in unison as they tried to push us back. They were clearing the intersection. We moved back, slowly, and then sat down to make it harder for them to move us. The cops stopped. On the other side of the intersection, the cops moved away and the crowd surged back toward us--trapping the line of police who were facing us. They then had to thread their way out leaving us the street. We jumped up, cheered and moved on, laughing and chanting "Whose streets? Our streets!" It was a moment of triumph. The bloc linked up, chanting, "The bloc supports the Pagans, the Pagans support the bloc!" At the rally on the Supreme Court lawn, we had a check in and a spokes from the bloc came over to thank us and ask if we'd like to coordinate actions in the afternoon. "I was glad to support the bloc," one woman in our group said, "But I don't know exactly what I'm supporting." A delightful young man came over and explained to us that the black bloc is a tactic adopted by mostly anarchist groups. They dress in black and mask up out of solidarity, to show that their actions are not about individuals but about group cohesion, and because they fear the apparatus of state security. "We're utopianists," he said. "We try to live our politics and our revolution. We're the most dedicated and committed of the activists. When we're not blocking up, we're doing all kinds of ongoing political work. We serve food to the homeless. We take over squats, we work on all kinds of issues. We don't initiate violence, but if we're attacked, we'll defend ourselves. And we're so grateful for your support. I'm a Pagan!" he concluded. "I'm an anarchist!" I said, and much of the River agreed.

After the rally, a different militant contingent marched to the barricades and attempted to storm them but was pushed back by water cannons, pepper spray and rubber bullets. We held a spiral dance in the red zone, snake danced across barricades, and then went across the river and around to the green zone reserved for nonviolent civil disobedience. Paul, one of the organizers, with three others had peacefully attempted to cross the barricades and been arrested, hauled roughly off and tasered in the leg. We arrived just after he'd been taken away and led a spiral dance.

On Sunday, we went down to the courthouse in the morning to do jail support. We had called for a ritual at the human rights monument at noon. Another small affinity group wanted to do a die-in at the barricades. We combined ideas, coalescing with a group of French students who were doing a mock military march, formed up in groups of four, chanting "Gauche, gauche, extreme gauche." "Left, left, extreme left,". We did a very simple grounding-with no sound system everything had to be repeated to be heard. We called in the elements with a word or two, got everyone dancing, and then danced down the street, or marched in formation, depending on your preference, to the War Memorial. The faux military march marched around, then died. One by one, people called out what was dying, and threw themselves dramatically down on the ground. When the dead started to look restless, I began a heartbeat on the drum, they revived, and we danced a spiral, raising a very sweet cone of power. Then the students lifted up 'corpses' and carried them to the barricades, dropping them down and dragging them up to the metal barriers. A few people made speeches. We read the Cochabamba declaration, written by the people of Bolivia after they took their water supply back from privatization by the World Bank and IMF. It declares water to be a sacred trust and human right to be guarded by an international treaty. We brought out our Reverse Wishing Well filled with Waters of the World and colorful marbles. We passed it around, inviting people to make a wish for that better world that is possible, and to think about what they would do to make it real.

We went off to have coffee and cake and leaflet in the market, encouraging people to think about alternative ways to show love and affection besides shopping at corporate stores.

The protests were successful in showing that, even during the climate of increased repression after September 11, and even on very short notice, we could mount a strong opposition to the institutions of globalization. But more than that, they gave us a chance to try out on a smaller scale some practical street solidarity. We have a lot of differences in the movement, ideological, tactical, differences of style. We're trying hard to hold those tensions, and so far, we're more successful than any movement I've been a part of before. But it's a fairly new attempt, and not easy. We're bound to make mistakes, and bound to let each other down. Still, with all the difficulties and frustrations, we need each other. In these times of increased repression, we've got to watch each other's backs. When the dog bites The Baby, there's no other choice.

-- *Starhawk*

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