

Getting Our Tactics Right: Lessons from the Calgary G8 Mobilization

By Starhawk

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An effective direct action needs to be a bit like Goldilocks's porridge: not too hot, not too cold, but just right. The recent protests in Alberta against the G8, the heads of the eight most industrialized countries, are an example of what happens when we apply organizing models that don't actually fit the situation we're in. When we cook for a hotter fire than we actually have, we end up with porridge that is colder than it needs to be.

The numbers in Calgary were small, never more than five thousand, but the actions were successful in many ways. They strengthened local organizing and raised awareness of the issues. By Calgary's standards, getting that many people out on the streets was a major victory, especially in light of the campaign of fear mongering and criminalization waged against the activists by the government and media. The Canadian labour movement gave the actions strong support, and the completely peaceful nature of the protests left the public outraged with the government and G8 for spending \$300 million on meeting security. The organizers did an heroic job, overcoming huge obstacles to create the infrastructure for the mobilization and provide a strong framework for actions.

Nevertheless, Calgary suffered from one grave fault: the lack of a powerful, coherent action that could have made a significant impact on the G8. More people might have made the trek to Calgary, at least from the West Coast, had some clear vision of an action been put forth. And to truly dismantle the structures of power we are contesting, an action needs an edge, a sense of real confrontation.

The Calgary G8 actions were organized around respect for diversity of tactics. I was never sure why, as nobody I met actually wanted to use any tactics that went beyond clear definitions of nonviolence. Even the Anti-Capitalist Convergence, generally among the more militant groups, planned an action asking for no physical confrontation.

Calgary just wasn't the place or time for high confrontation tactics or property destruction, no matter how principled. Calgary is called "the Texas of Canada" for both its oil wealth and right wing politics. It has no tradition of street protests, and its radical culture, though vibrant, is very small. Street fighting and window smashing would have basically undercut any future efforts at radical organizing in Calgary and possibly throughout Alberta.

So why, then, didn't the organizers simply agree to principles of nonviolence for the action? Partly because "diversity of tactics" has become the movement default mode, the way we assume a powerful, militant, major summit action should be organized. The type of powerful direct action that actually could have been organized in Calgary has dropped off our radar screen. Conditions in Calgary cried out for a mass action that was both disruptive but explicitly nonviolent.

The focus on diversity of tactics has served us well in some ways. It broke through what can easily become a stifling moralism around nonviolence and an unthinking reliance on stale, static tactics. It has allowed us to avoid potentially divisive conflicts, but at a cost. Instead of actually arguing about what makes sense in a given situation, we simply say "we support diversity of tactics" without ever defining what those tactics might actually be.

Our very vagueness scares people off: nobody really knows if we've agreed to support anarchist soccer in the streets or smashing the windows of the local banks. We reinforce the fear campaigns waged by the media and government.

When we avoid discussions and yes, arguments, about violence and nonviolence, many people are left thinking "nonviolent" is synonymous with "safe," "legal," "passive," and "nonconfrontational." The corollary, then, is that any disruptive action or any civil disobedience becomes seen as violent. But confrontation and disruption are essential aspects of effective nonviolent direct action. Risking arrest is a time-honored aspect of nonviolent civil disobedience. Yet often, now, I hear people in the movement echo the media's assumption that an action that leads to arrest must have been violent. At the Calgary action debriefing, one woman complained vehemently that "We agreed this caravan was going to be nonviolent, and then suddenly someone was asking how many people were prepared to be arrested!"

As a result, people who want to act nonviolently end up in safe, nonconfrontational actions that lack the power to truly confront or delegitimize the power structure. We lose the chance to organize mass nonviolent civil disobedience or disruptive yet nonviolent direct actions. The planning of specific actions is mostly left to affinity groups, which often don't actually exist, because we haven't mobilized and organized in a way that could create and sustain them. Even experienced groups are unlikely to plan strong, autonomous actions in a vacuum, without the momentum of others doing the same, and without clear coordination. The focus on security culture that accompanies "diversity of tactics" makes coordination difficult, and keeps us from knowing what, if anything is being planned.

If the phantoms were real, if there actually were an army of mindless anarchist thugs prepared to sweep into any summit town and sack it, things would at least get interesting. But the "thugs" in question are not, in reality, mindless. They are deeply concerned with things like how to strengthen ongoing everyday organizing in our home communities, how to expand the diversity within our movement, and how to be allies with people of color, immigrants, and labor. Asking those questions is inevitably going to pull people back from confrontation for its own sake, and toward planning actions in which labor and immigrants can actually participate.

When we organize around "diversity of tactics" and then try to mobilize a broader

community of people, we often end up at the last minute agreeing to keep our actions "green" or at least nonconfrontational. As a result, our actions end up tamer and less effective than they could be if, from the beginning, we had organized a disruptive nonviolent direct action that could truly interfere with some institution of oppression in more than a symbolic way.

So, in Calgary, we might have planned a car caravan to back up the Canadian Union of Postal Workers who went to the barricades at Kananaskis with messages to deliver. We could have blocked the road and refused to leave until the postal workers were allowed through, or blocked delegates from leaving the meeting until they came out and heard our perspectives on the issues. Or we could have ended a downtown snake march with mass blockades at oil companies, to make the connection between oil, global corporate capitalism, and the "war on terror."

But to take any of those or other truly disruptive actions, we would have needed to organize in ways that are possible only in the political space opened up by an explicit commitment to nonviolence.

Strategic nonviolence lets us mobilize broadly around actions that are more than symbolic, that actually interfere with the operations of an institution of power. Unions and NGOs, and at-risk groups can support and participate in such actions, which contain many necessary roles at varied levels of risk.

Committing to nonviolence as a strategic move for a particular action allows us to organize openly, without security culture and with broad participation in decisionmaking. While open organizing means we lose the element of surprise in our planning, we can take that into account. The worst failures in actions are those that depend on security that is rarely tight enough to actually foil the authorities, but often too exclusive to let us do wide outreach for an action. Transparency allows us to actually educate, mobilize, and inspire people to join us. While security culture may be necessary at times, it works against empowerment and direct democracy. People can only have a voice in the decisions that affect them if they know what is being decided and what the options are. Transparent organizing also undercuts the power of infiltrators and provocateurs.

Open organizing means that we accept the risk of identification by the authorities and even arrest, not because we want to be martyrs, but to free up our thinking and let us do things we otherwise wouldn't do. A commitment to nonviolence means that our actions fall under at least some constitutional protections, and gives us some leverage against persecution. Large numbers and prior planning also let us develop jail solidarity strategies that can minimize the consequences of arrest.

Disruptive nonviolent direct action is not easily organized as a last-minute substitute for a "red" action we decide we can't pull off. It requires time to educate, mobilize and prepare people, to form and train affinity groups, to organize home support and jail support, to wrestle with fear and weigh the consequences of taking risks.

If we are to regain momentum in the post 9-11 climate for issues of global justice, we need actions that can mobilize large numbers of people to do more than simply march. We need to embrace discussion and debate, and trust that our movement is strong,

resilient, and mature enough to tolerate open differences of opinion. We might agree that a diversity of tactics are needed in the long run to undermine global corporate capitalism, and still be willing to commit to strategic nonviolence for an action when it seems the strongest option. Otherwise, we end up without either diversity or tactics.

The next major mobilization is planned for Washington, DC, September 25 to September 30. It's time to see, among the spectrum of activities planned, a powerful, disruptive, explicitly nonviolent mass action.

A Pagan Cluster is being formed for the actions at the end of September against the IMF and World Bank in Washington DC. To participate in organizing and mobilizing and to link with the cluster, email livriv-subscribe@yahoo.com. The major organizations calling actions are:

AntiCapitalist Convergence

Main Day of action: 9/27

See the website at:

http://www.abolishthebank.org/en/october2002_strike_call.html

NOTE: the above page will open in a new browser window.

Mobilization for Global Justice

Main Day of action: 9/28

See the website at:

<http://www.globalizethis.org/fightback/>

NOTE: the above page will open in a new browser window.

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