

Reclaim the Commons

Wrap-Up Account, Parts One and Two

By Starhawk

Well, this is no longer an update but a wrap-up. The last three days of Reclaim the Commons were so full, and I was so tired at night, that I just couldn't force myself to stay awake and write, and then I got hit with the flu which laid me on my back for a few days reading old mystery novels, dozing, and shuddering at the very thought of opening my computer. But here's a wrap-up:

Monday [June 7] was the Racial Justice Day of action. In the morning, we gathered at the Federal Building for a rally linking the torture at Abu Ghraib with the beatings and brutalizing of kids here at home in our own California Youth Authority. Our liason, Lori, was arrested as she handed our permit to the cops, on some old warrant which they had never informed her of during the three weeks she'd been negotiating with them, and which proved to be a bureaucratic error, but not before she'd spent three days in jail.

The rally was small, but represented an important moment of alliance building between the global justice activists--mostly white--and the racial justice activists--mostly black. Books Not Bars cosponsored it, and many local youth stood up and spoke about their own experience in the California Youth Authority. We heard from the families of victims of police violence, from kids who had been killed in the CYA to kids killed on the street by cops, and finished with a very moving address recorded by Mumia Abu Jamal, that did a brilliant job of linking all the issues, and urged us all to Reclaim the Commons.

We then marched to the State building to demand that guards at the California Youth Authority who were caught on tape beating bound and handcuffed youth be prosecuted.

Later in the day we held trainings back at the Convergence Center, including a packed session on Movement Building/Anti-Racism. We marched to the Mexican consulate to demand that our compas in Guadalajara, arrested in May for protesting a trade summit and subjected to beatings and torture, be released. And we held our last pre-action spokescouncil to finalize our plans.

At the council, it became finally apparent that our numbers were not strong for the direct action. The Greenbloc and Pagan Clusters were taking one key intersection, at 4th and Howard. We managed to form up a cluster to take the second key intersection, at 3rd and Howard, and a plan for how to gather up any stray people who would turn up at the gathering point at 5th and Market. And we formed up our communications system to use in deciding in-the-moment on various options for plan B. I went to sleep in a mood of exhausted resignation. Either we would have an effective action, or we

wouldn't--but I had done all I could do.

I really, really hate early morning actions, and Tuesday's started with a 5:00 a.m. wakeup call. Somehow I made it to the Pagan Cluster's meeting point with drum and plants in hand. We gathered up a group, consulted with our Greenbloc friends who were approaching from two other directions, and marched to 4th and Howard, where we stayed on the sidewalk, drumming and chanting, until Sonoma Greenbloc arrived.

They had managed to unload and carry their plants and other equipment to the intersection. A policeman had observed them pulling out many heavy bags with plants sticking out and stopped and questioned Erik.

"What are you doing?"

"Oh, just carrying plants," Erik said. "They represent the world we want."

"A world of plants?" the officer asked. Erik nodded, and he walked away, which was fortunate as the plants sat atop the lockboxes they were about to deploy.

The Greenbloc reached the intersection, we stepped up our drumming, and in a swift movement, they rushed into the center, and unfurled a big banner that said, "Grow Your Sovereignty" in English and Spanish. Behind its shelter, they whipped out long tubes, inserted their arms, and inside, locked their wrists into metal rods so that their arms were locked together. They sat in a wide circle with their tenders inside. But Hilary, a small, slight woman, was grabbed by the police before she could get her second arm locked to her partner. The cops began pulling her, twisting her shoulder and locked arm. She was screaming in pain, and all of us were shouting, "Don't hurt her!" and "Nonviolence!" until finally the cop who had her let her go. They pulled back, and for a moment we had a beautiful image of a green island of plants in the center, the living, organic world we're fighting for, topped with a waving, Greenbloc flag, protected by the locked circle.

Then the cops moved in and began taking the plants. The corners of the streets were crowded and I attempted to lead a spiral dance into the intersection, but each time we moved in we got shoved back by police batons. Busses full of conference-goers and traffic were backed up for blocks and in spite of our small numbers, we were having more of an impact on the conference than we'd had on many similar events with much bigger crowds.

We held the corner for a long time. Conference-goers with badges began arriving, trying to push through, and we were able to nonviolently block them, on both sides of the street. Eventually, the police brought in furniture dollies, flat boards on wheels, loaded our locked-down friends onto them, and rolled them away from the intersection. We noticed a line of police lunging at us from behind each time we stopped a conference-goer, and decided to march our corner out while we still could.

We marched down Howard and around the south end of Moscone Center. I was stuck, as always, with the practical difficulties of getting even a relatively small group of people to march through the streets in a coherent fashion. You would think that, with riot cops

to the left of you, riot cops to the right of you, the small intrepid band of marchers going forward would be on the alert, paying attention to each other and all the subtle cues of escalating danger in the environment. But in fact, people are more likely to be happily marching along, oblivious of everyone else. The faster marchers in front stride off without ever glancing behind to see if everyone else is keeping up. The strollers in back get involved in conversations and lose track of the front. No one wants to do anything as authoritarian as follow a leader, yet they aren't organized into any democratic decisionmaking process either. A few of us who have lots of street experience and were hooked into the communications network did our best to suggest directions, check the reports of our scouts, and consult with other groups that we encountered. The fleet of bicyclists who had gathered that morning swept by. We heard reports that the cluster at 3rd and Howard had blocked busses, that several people had dived under busses and locked down to them. We encountered conference-goers and blockaded them and avoided lines of police, and somehow made our way back to 4th and Howard, coming in this time from the north and spreading out into the street.

A line of cops began pushing us back. I'd been buddying up with Kirk, one of the medics, and we were doing a slow bit of passive resistance, moving back at a glacial pace as a very polite cop tried to persuade us, "Just a little more. One more step." But then another group of protestors swarmed in behind the cops. Red-haired Nyx was playing her finger cymbals and everyone just danced into the street, leaving our line of cops trapped between them.

"Don't worry, everyone is completely nonviolent," I assured them, and they shrugged and left us the street.

So for hours we carried on a beautiful demonstration right at the key intersection to Moscone Center. Conference-goers passed by, and got engaged in dialogue with demonstrators. We danced, chanted, held meetings and drum circles, and maintained a bright and peaceful presence. While it didn't shut the conference down, it made clear to everyone involved that strong resistance exists to corporate control of our food supply and of medical research.

And here I should perhaps make clear some of the subtler points of our protest which are hard to convey in a four-line chant or a two-minute soundbite. Most of the conference was focused on pharmaceutical biotech, not agricultural biotech--and many of the researchers who work on medical issues in fact agreed with us about the dangers of uncontrolled contamination of our food crops. Our issues with pharmaceutical biotech are not that we are against research or anti-cures for cancer, nor do we think those who work in the field are evil. What we are against is the corporate control of research, the influence of the profit motive in setting its direction, the privatization of the building blocks of knowledge that might lead to cures, and the efforts of the pharmaceutical industry--which has one of the highest profit margins in the world!--to protect its economic interests at the expense of the sick.

Of the 30,000 genes in the human body, 1,000 are patented by corporations who thus can control and profit from all research that involves those genes. Plants and herbs used for generations by indigenous people have been patented by drug companies with no compensation to the communities who discovered their uses, and genomes of whole

populations, such as the Tongan islanders, have been patented as well. Drug companies lobby to prevent Brazil and Africa from producing cheap, generic AIDS drugs, causing the death of millions to safeguard that high profit margin.

So, for example, Bayer, which funds cancer research, is also one of the world's leading producers of pesticides. How much of that research do we imagine is being directed at environmental causes of cancer? Now, one of my friends who works in the field informs me that the medical arm and the pesticide arm are entirely separate, that the people she works with are good people who feel good about finding cures for cancer. And of course they are, and no one would dispute that cures for cancer would be a good thing. It's not the individuals we are protesting against--it's the overall system that constrains our collective choices and priorities, so that billions are being spent on high-tech diagnostics and potential cures, but are NOT being spent on diagnosing the environmental causes, nor on removing toxins from the environment. And the fact that the same corporation makes the toxins as funds the research IS relevant to its direction. For that matter, even the biotech industry admits that so far there have been relatively poor results for all that money spent. That's not necessarily a sin--scientific research does often take years to bear fruit. But consider for a moment how many lives could have saved if those billions had been spent on providing universal health care for everyone in this country. And then ask, who decided on these priorities?

None of this is the fault of the researchers. It's the fault of a system that makes short-term profits the main goal and responsibility of corporate executives, removes corporations from roots and accountability to real communities, and then determines that this same profit motive should ultimately set the direction of scientific research.

All of this is hard to convey on the street, which is why we also organized teach-ins and press conferences and Biotech 101 trainings as part of this mobilization. Still, getting a nuanced message through the corporate media is about as likely as shooting an arrow accurately through about five layers of chain link fence. Not utterly impossible, but not too likely either. We have articulate speakers available to the media who can make our case with elegance, but they seem to prefer quotes from wandering tourists or irate motorists. We have our own media, from Indybay to KPFA, but to the average TV watcher or SF Chronicle reader, probably the only message that comes through is that we're saying "Biotech bad" with only the vaguest indications of why. And I'm not sure what, if anything, more we can do about this--it's the constant frustration of these actions, and one reason why I write my own chronicles.

Around noon, the cops suddenly decide they've had enough. Perhaps it is the presence of the anarchist marching band, a small group of drummers in black and punk regalia--who are doing nothing more menacing than drumming, but who look to cops like they might someday be planning to do something, just as Saddam Hussein looked to Bush as if he might someday be eager to acquire those elusive WMDs. Kirk and I try to gather a quick spokescouncil in the street, both to decide how to respond and because a circle of people sitting in the road would be a deterrent to a police sweep of the anarchists down the way, but the cops move in before we can get people to form up and hold the space, and push everyone off but us. We are left, sitting together, looking up at the boots and knees of the cops that surround us.

"If you don't move, you'll be arrested," they warn us.

We look at each other. It's so tempting! I'm tired. I'm tired of marching and chanting, my throat is sore and my drum arm is wilting and I'm really, really tired of trying to get people's attention and get them to do things and feeling responsible. And here is this kind policeman offering me a way out! But then we sigh and shake our heads.

Something tells us both that we need to stay on the street--if only because so many other experienced people have already been arrested. We get up and walk over to the sidewalk, just in time to see a line of cops charge the demonstrators further down who are gathered around the anarchist drum corps. The cops are swinging batons and beating somebody with real force, and shoving the happy, dancing, peaceful demonstrators onto the sidewalk. A few newspaper stands get knocked over, and the cops form a line on the street. Some of the protestors are yelling at the cops, and the cops are doing their best to provoke a riot.

"Shut up you fucking bitch," I hear a cop say to the young woman next to me. His name is Officer Johnson and he has a little smirk on his face. I'm in between, trying to calm people, when a young woman with wild red hair jumps in front and begins a wailing, wordless, magical song, spinning a spell of sound that changes the energy. I've never seen her before, and I don't know where she's come from, but she knows how to work magic. Some of the Pagan Cluster join her and begin drumming, using the newspaper stands as drums. Much of the Black Bloc is now crushed against the side of the building, blocking the sidewalk where conference-goers continue to thread their way through, pushing between the protestors. Nobody molests them--but had anyone in our crowd actually been violent or dangerous, the police move would now have pushed them directly in the way of their supposed targets.

We decide to march out, and do, after awakening the drummers from their trance. We march around the conference center to 3rd and Howard, and then decide to disperse and regroup back at the Convergence Center for an impromptu spokescouncil meeting. A group of us grab a quick sandwich at a donut shop where half the police force is also refreshing themselves, and head back.

At the meeting, we decide to rest for an hour or so, then join the Reclaim the Streets anti-G8 march that begins at 5:00 p.m., at UN Plaza near City Hall. I grab a short nap in the Wellness Center, which has come into full use, a magical, quiet, healing space just off the big meeting room. Entering it is truly like entering another world--with people dozing on the carpets, incense and soft music filling the atmosphere, a few people receiving massage and others curled on soft couches. I lie down and an angelic woman gives me a beautiful foot massage as I drift into sleep for an hour or so. The Wellness Center was a brilliant idea and I hope we do it for other actions--a great model of care and self-care, that maybe counteracts the less exemplary example of all the key organizers who are overworked, overstretched, and pushed far beyond our limits.

I wake up with enough energy to go out to the march. Reclaim the Streets has gathered at UN Plaza, farther up Market Street. The march is supposed to be a Mutant's Ball in honor of biotech and the G8, but few people have had the leisure or energy to construct costumes. A couple hundred of us start off, with the loud, thumping sound system pulled on a bike cart, in a festive mood. I am hanging toward the back, partly to keep

away from the sound system, which is too loud for what's left of my already faulty hearing, and partly because I'm tired and fortunately, not responsible for anything on this march. The march attempts to turn up Hyde Street into the Tenderloin, but a line of cops push us back. We continue down Market Street, until at 5th and Market we run into a solid line of cops.

I'm walking with Joan, another middle-aged woman like myself who is part of Sonoma County Greenbloc, and I pull her to the side and quickly scan the scene in case the cops are planning to surround and arrest all of us--something the San Francisco police are fond of doing. We head to the sidewalk on the south side of the street, and move back along Market. Sure enough, a second line of cops has us trapped from behind. We go up to one of the officers and ask politely if we can leave. He tells us "no." At this point we have heard no warning, no order to disperse. I look around for another exit, don't find one. Then suddenly the line in front of us moves away, to close in on the demonstrators still in the middle of the street. We quickly slip past, and hear an announcement over the police bullhorn:

"Do not attempt to break through police lines, or you will be met by police batons. You are under arrest."

We wait and watch. At this point, the police have thoroughly blocked Market Street. Busses are backed up, and a big traffic jam paws and snorts behind their barricades. The march would have passed through in fifteen minutes: they continue to keep the street blocked for five hours as they slowly book something like 150 protestors. I was glad we'd escaped--we had a whole day of ecoprojects planned for the next day, and never enough experienced gardeners.

We watch and wait. The sun sets, and it's getting cold. Food Not Bombs arrives and tosses sandwiches into the trapped crowd. We mill around, talking to our other friends who have escaped the net. A number of our friends who were arrested in the morning are already out of jail--most have fortunately escaped being arrested again. Finally a few of us go to get dinner and start the spokescouncil meeting, another necessary task, where we can arrange jail support and solidarity.

[to be continued]

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