

MAYDAY CANCELLED!



COMMENTS FROM SOME MEMBERS OF THE LONDON MAYDAY COLLECTIVE

Following a meeting held in mid-January the London Mayday Collective decided not to proceed with plans for an anti-capitalist event this year. This will be the first time in 5 years that there has not been an event of its kind in London and we hope what follows will help to explain the reasoning behind the decision and perhaps begin some discussion into the prospects for planning future Mayday events, keeping in mind what has gone before. What follows is a personal reflection from a couple of participants in this year's collective rather than a statement issued by the group as a whole.



The decision to postpone London Mayday 2004 was taken only after several disappointing and poorly attended meetings that had produced little in the way of either a concrete proposal for gathering around or a strong unifying theme that could lead to ideas worth developing. In these circumstances we feel not calling an event this year is the right thing to do. This may disappoint many, least not those Met officers who had already factored their overtime into this year's summer holiday budgets! It will also allow those who have argued against an annual Mayday event the opportunity to put their arguments to the test. Whatever the feeling for Mayday activities, we now have the opportunity of at least a year's breathing space to review where we are as a movement, to discuss some of the problems associated with the event in its current form and to look to what opportunities lie ahead.

Before we begin with the issues we inherited in this year's collective, it is necessary to remind ourselves of the

context within which the anti-capitalist Mayday emerged. Without understanding the context and composition of the collective, any discussion of attendant successes and failures of recent Mayday events is somewhat limited - as is any discussion of the future of the event.

WE'RE GONNA PARTY LIKE ITS 1999...

Beginning in 1999 the Mayday tube party expressed the desire to build on earlier links formed between the activist community and striking workers in various sectors; in this case transport. The public transport issue in particular dovetailed naturally into the motivations of many of those around Reclaim the Streets. This period at the end of the 90s had yielded an expanding base of activists, which had been developing from the beginning of the decade.

We will briefly look at three distinct perspectives at work in the collective in the last few years to a greater or lesser degree: the direct action/activist community, the anarchists & communists and the left.

1. THE DIRECT ACTION SCENE

In DIY circles many of the activists that had emerged out the anti-roads protests earlier in the decade and into networks like Earth First! and RTS were reaching their political maturity. Though not realised at the time this movement was also quickly approaching its zenith. A number of these activists were to step aside in the next couple of years. Perhaps it was to escape the glare of growing media and academic interest in this new political culture being pored over by 'social theorists'. Or perhaps it was that many inevitably acquired new priorities, beyond the separateness between activism and other spheres of life. Others still were no doubt refining their politics and moving into new areas of enquiry and interest.

J18 in the City of London had yet to happen. Though only a month away, the previous years build up had been a frenzy of activity and countless meetings to finalise details, pull together the working groups, spread the call internationally. Though credited with being the first 'global' day of action it is worth noting the previous year (1998) had witnessed an enormous

street party in Birmingham to coincide with the UK hosted G7 meeting taking place in the city. This in reality was the first manifestation of the summit-crashing phenomenon that continues to occupy the time and energies of many activists today.

As we have already mentioned, links were being nurtured and further developed between the direct action scene especially around London RTS with tube workers and the striking Liverpool Dockers. It was a period of optimism, growth and potential. If we are being honest however, these new alliances doubtless said more about the defeated state of the 'organised labour movement' than it did of any upward trajectory in either the direct action scene itself or indeed mass direct action returning to the armoury of proletarian struggles at this time. Direct action may have seemed to be ascendant but perhaps this appearance was exaggerated by contrasting it against a more generalised passivity and absence of class action.

2. THE ANARCHISTS & COMMUNISTS

The relationship between the 'official' anarchist movement (for want of a better term) together with those communists who reject Leninism and the direct action scene, it is fair to say, is one that has been approached by both with more than a little apprehension. The anarchists and communists on the one side, suspicious of what appeared an opt-out lifestyle, lacking any political (class) analysis, doubted the longevity and the potential for a developing political movement from what it may have crudely written off as a youthful counter-culture. Conversely those direct actionists, neither versed nor interested in the fine detail of proletarian struggle or the waves of revolutionary momentum that swept the world in earlier periods of the century viewed the formal anarchists and communists as didacts, ideologues and most frustratingly for the activist: armchair revolutionaries.

This relationship we would argue, has been allowed to become caricatured this way as neither tendency seem particularly interested in finding ways to work with the other. It is of course possible that each tradition's percep-

tion of the other is thrown up by both tendencies as a defence to obscure any close examination that might reveal weaknesses or deficiencies in their own back yards! This is as true for the anarchists and communists as it is for their counterparts in the direct actionist camp.

Having said this, it would equally be crude generalisation to attempt to



The Sambaistas: love 'em or loathe 'em, you cannot ignore 'em

shoehorn people too far into camps that oppose each other. It is often the case that elements of both sides of this relationship are present in many of us. Furthermore we see no contradiction as revolutionaries in working with others in direct action whilst maintaining a critical approach both to the specific event, and to the problems of scattergun actionism in general.¹

We do this with an awareness of the problem of inertia that can creep in when politico's will blithely dismiss *any* contemporary action as bogus, as not being *authentic* working class activity. We would question by which yardstick such authenticity is measurable in any case. Indeed we think it is not only possible but necessary to work with others in this area. The relationship between these two tendencies is in fact much more subtle and nuanced than it first appears.

For some of these anarchists and communists, the net effect of disengagement with the wider direct action movement in this period has been to cut off their noses to spite their faces. What wasn't entirely appreciated by

many was that whatever the flaws or inherent weaknesses - and there were more than a few - a *space* had been created by the street party/DIY scene into which a great many people, perhaps new to formal politics were pouring into, thirsty for ideas. It was a space that might not have looked familiar in form to these politico's: there were neither slogans being mouthed nor speeches being listened

to - except perhaps from an open mic free-for-all. There was just... well... people dancing! And of course, for a great many attending these shindigs that *was* all it was about. But whether the intention of the party-seeker was dancing or proselytising, it was impossible to do either in the streets without being made aware of the intimidating uniformed presence of the protectors of capital all around, ready to pounce and attack. It seems some of our comrades cannot be reminded enough of Emma Goldman's often repeated dictum on such matters. A case if ever there was one of not seeing the wood for the trees. Que sera.

Attempts to discuss these kinds of issues have been largely dismissed and the situation remains the same today as it was back in 1999, albeit with some different protagonists involved along the way. Even Mayday 2000, with a conference and actions, still tended to reinforce the separation between theory and practice. It is not likely that we will see any change to this dynamic in the near future. It also seems to be a situation peculiarly specific to London, perhaps given the huge concentration of activists and

the ease with which one can insulate oneself within a particular group or network of friends/activists.

3. THE LEFT

And what of the Left? Well we don't intend to discuss them in any detail. Mayday then, as with every other Mayday before and since, consisted of marching to the tune of those dinosaurs of the vastly diminished 'labour aristocracy' from Clerkenwell Green to Trafalgar Square. The one notable change in direction that emerged out of this period - following the euphoria from the *Carnival against Capitalism* - was a reorientation within a year towards the activist/anti-capitalist milieu. They had given up dismissing the movement as a bunch of 'petit-bourgeois/middle-headed' types and could no longer ignore pressure from their own base. Thus began a series of initiatives seeking to devise a modern looking transmission belt into the party. Their intervention at previous Mayday collective meetings has been a source of constant hard work to keep the agenda on track, attempting to avoid an insipid leftist culture creeping in through the back door.

Unfortunately for them, this ill defined, disparate and often contradictory movement, if it is anything, finds its unity with an antipathy to hierarchical organisation and moreover containing many of us with avowedly anti-Leninist politics.

So what has any of this got to do with Mayday 2004 being postponed? Well, because many of the conditions outlined above led us to begin reclaiming Mayday as *our day* in the first place. The space that had been created by the street party scene for colourful, inspirational, empowering politics; politics that were actually fun rather than dull alienated drudgery. They provided a temporary area that connected people with the idea that they had 'agency' that change was possible, and there were others out there

who wanted the same. Even if this at times manifested itself as naïve optimism, it was nonetheless a vast improvement from the suffering victimhood that accompanies Leftist practice and propaganda; and the approach this engenders in its exponents.

WAR, THE STATE AND BEYOND

This all now seems a distant memory looking back from the post 9-11 world of raw belligerence from the state upon any alternatives seeking to challenge capital's hegemony. Little did we know that fending off the 'bolshevisation' of this developing opposition would be the least of our concerns as impending catastrophe in the form of capitalist war from the coalition and its allies against their domestic proletariat and that in the Middle East beckoned.

Opposition to the *new new world order* has now become the focus for many of us, and 2003's Mayday rightly claimed opposition to war as its theme. However falling attendance on Mayday over the last couple of years has led to discussion within and without the collective. Indeed the reduced turnout within the collective organising group has fired some debate about how we should be working with each other and reignited some of the tensions discussed above. ²

Of concern to us all should be the effect on our movement of intensive state scrutiny and the shutting down of debate that has any kind of perceived oppositional politics. There has been a palpable retreat of activity generally and this may have consequences for how some of us might then choose to organise and act.

While many of the infrastructures cre-

ated by the anti-capitalist community in recent years continue: alternative media, social centres, local, regional and national gatherings of various kinds; the presence of people mobilised into action and onto the streets has dissipated. For example DSEI in London's Docklands last year should have been *the* event that galvanised the many strands of the anti-capitalist scene into action. It was certainly no fault on the part of the organisers, who had covered all bases, attended many meetings over many months, producing plenty of advance publicity, a mixture of roving affinity groups and larger groupings being present throughout the days of action. But the sheer lack of turnout here disappointed and surprised some and as a result many felt that the event had fallen flat. We need to face up to the new reality: embedded police forward intelligence & surveillance and pre-emptive tactics have largely worn us down.

The room for experiment under these new social conditions, for alternatives to develop, for discussion, for organising, all seem to have contracted. As some Italian comrades put it "the masters know that the current social conditions, increasingly marked by precariousness ... can be imposed only through terror. Such terror is manifested in the exterior, in the form of war, and in the interior, in the form of fear for the future (for example, fear of remaining without work) or through the increasingly widespread repression of social groups." ³

Those arriving for what turned out to be the final meeting of the collective were met by police FIT team photographers, whose purpose is to intimidate as much as to gather intelligence. We know of one person who turned round and went home, rather than run the gauntlet.

SOME CONCERNS

In light of the current social terrain we have some concerns for how we might



then choose to organise, as a result of 'feeling the heat' from the state bearing down on us. One could conclude the solution to increased surveillance, infiltration of meetings, pre-emptive police tactics and crowd control, would be to tighten up security, to have closed meetings, abandon mass mobilisations in favour of working in affinity groups, doing more covert actions. We cannot stress strongly enough that these are the politics of a movement defeated. We need to be clear on this: we must continue to conduct our politics in the open, on the streets, making the process transparent and accessible - even if that means accepting that journalists and police will sometimes be present. If by doing this we are individually attacked by the state we must mobilise a robust legal defence and support for our comrades. The only alternative is returning back to the ghetto that it took many years throughout the 80s and early 90s to emerge out from.

And these concerns are not simply put at the level of security. Conducting our politics in the open is crucial to developing a vision of what a world beyond capital would be like. Means and ends should at one on this: what is important is how we relate with others, who we engage with, how we choose to organise. Our methods reflect the kind of world we want to create. Do we really want a return to the underground politics of the affinity group or the vanguard specialism only to be accessed by those experts in the know? This is no more than reproducing the kinds of social relations - (there, we've said it!) - we have within capitalism. Revolution is not about militants in balaclavas taking up arms, it is a profoundly *social* event that permeates the very marrow of society, and that implies it being a task that must involve the majority.



A new social subject?

One of the more interesting appearances in the build up to war was the militancy among schoolchildren and young people and apparently unmediated direct action. It is also worth trying to understand their absence at manifestations called by the direct action movement such as the DSEI arms fair

If the affinity group is not the solution, then what kinds of mass participation on Mayday are possible? It is quite clear that nobody wants to be herded around, stopped and searched by the police any longer. Unfortunately we do not have any answers to offer here, but simply an appeal for the discussion to begin and be opened up on this very question. The anti-capitalist movement has reached several crossroads in the short, intense 5 years since it re-emerged onto the streets. We are now at a point where we must decide whether an annual Mayday event should continue at all and if so, what form it should take.

To return to the original vision, Mayday was always intended as a fun, empowering space for action and dialogue; an occasion where we could come together, celebrate our collective struggles and those that have gone before us, and to meet others, at a time and a place of our choosing. If there are now fewer of us currently coming together and little enjoyment to be gleaned from under a police microscope then the legitimate question now to be asked is what kind of Mayday can we successfully pull off? What kind of

event can return Mayday to its original vision? We hope that this might be the beginning of a discussion rather than the end of one.

Footnotes

1. Two useful critiques of this being found at: www.eco-action.org/dod/no9/activism.htm and a more recently produced discussion on this situation in the US at: www.leftbusinessobserver.com/Action.html
2. For instance see *Mayday - Where Now?* (review article of *Mayday 2003*, *Black Flag* #223, October 2003)
3. By *Some Rovereton Anarchists*: *Summits and Counter Summits* leaflet (reprinted from article *Green Anarchy* #15, Winter 03 / 04)



PICNIC

In place of this year's event the collective have invited anti-capitalists to join them for a **MAYDAY PICNIC** on Saturday 1st May from 3pm in St James's Park (which is also the nearest tube).

We should probably stress that the event is genuinely a picnic - *and nothing else* - so please bring what you would expect to find.

DISCUSS

This text is also on the Mayday Collective website
www.ourmayday.org.uk

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