

Direct Action Bombs Litton

Bob Brubaker

1983

On October 14 a bomb blast ripped apart a production building at the Litton Systems Canada Ltd. plant in Rexdale, Ontario, causing an estimated \$5 million in damage. The group Direct Action claimed responsibility for the bombing, which also injured seven people.

Direct Action is apparently the same group that claimed responsibility for the bombing of power transformers on Vancouver Island in British Columbia (see FE #309, June 19, 1982, for Direct Action's communique and our comments on it). This time, seven people were injured, due to the bomber's mistakes and the apparent incompetence of Litton's security personnel.

In their "Statement Regarding the October 14 Litton Bombing," Direct Action states that they sincerely regret the injuries caused in the action, but that they do not regret their decision to bomb the Litton plant, production facility for the Cruise Missile guidance system. They identify a number of mistakes they made that led to the unwanted injuries. They also "strongly criticize" the Litton security guards for their "handling" of the incident, listing several things the guards "should" have done so as to prevent injuries. But this criticism strikes me as dubious, because it requires that the security guards, who through no fault of their own either panicked or were never properly trained for the eventuality of a bombing, act in a coordinated manner to guarantee the safety of plant employees; this is really asking a lot of people whose reliability is impossible to guarantee.

As for the reason they undertook the bombing, Direct Action writes in their statement received by the *Fifth Estate*, "Nuclear war is beyond question the ultimate expression of the negative characteristics of Western Civilization. Its roots lie deep within centuries of patriarchy, racism, imperialism, class domination and all other forms of violence and oppression that have scarred human history. As well, nuclear war expresses, in the most horrendous way, the general trend of modern technological civilization toward extinction—either by war or ecological destruction. It points out, with terrorizing finality, that unless people can stop the men that dominate societies around the world—the men who use science and technology for war and profit—then the intricate natural world as we know it will cease to exist."

Direct Action also states that they have no illusions that direct action in and of itself can halt nuclear madness, but they are convinced that it can be a "springboard to the kind of consciousness and organization that must be developed" if we are to do so. They call upon "the already radical sectors of the movement for liberation and nuclear sanity [to] recognize that direct action and militant resistance can weaken the enemy now and [complement] the movement's strategic long-term efforts to transform the consciousness of the people. We believe that, if undertaken seriously and well-supported throughout the existing movement, widely practised militant resistance and sabotage will become effective in slowing down the clock of death and inspire the people to respond to the threats to our survival with urgency, vitality and clarity."

According to an article on Direct Action in the November 6 *Toronto Globe and Mail*, their activities have re-opened a debate among anarchists about the merits of this kind of resistance. Most anarchists interviewed in Toronto and Vancouver by the *Globe and Mail* reporter apparently agreed that the group was anarchist influenced; several were sympathetic to the group's aims. There are, however, certainly many anarchists who disagree with Direct Action's

approach. The article opined that the majority of anarchists are non-violent, and that anarchism has suffered from its terrorist image. And in a letter printed in the October 15 issue of *Strike*: “The Newspaper Dedicated to Direct Action” (though apparently not this Direct Action, whom they strongly criticize in their most recent issue), a Canadian anarchist contends that Direct Action was created by the police to discredit the growing movement against the Vancouver Island power project, which was the target of the group’s first action.

Although I don’t know any more about Direct Action than this anarchist does, I find his accusation that they are police provocateurs irresponsible. It is one thing to argue (as he also does), that Direct Action’s effect is to discredit the anti-Power (or anti-nuclear) movement; another thing altogether to accuse people, who may or may not be misguided in their decision as to how to act, of being cops, while producing nothing but the flimsiest of gossip and circumstantial evidence to substantiate the charge. It is, after all, another well-known police tactic to accuse others of being police provocateurs—and this kind of groundless accusation and counter-accusation can go on indefinitely.

As far as circumstantial evidence goes, if Direct Action is a police provocation, then the cops have hired on a writer who is well schooled in libertarian ideas. While I disagree with a considerable part of their analysis, it is grounded in a fairly sophisticated theoretical perspective; and their writing strikes me as a markedly non-rhetorical example of the “communique” genre: are the cops capable of this kind of writing?

And what do I think about Direct Action’s activity? I find it extremely difficult to make a definitive judgment about them. On the one hand, I am not at all persuaded by the usual anarchist dismissals. The anarchist who wrote the letter referred to above claims: “Despite all the illusion the present upsurge in radical action will sooner or later pass. What is important is the residue of solid organisations and tradition that it will leave. The libertarian left has a slim chance...of coming out as the dominant ideology on the left, finally displacing a decaying Marxism. If, however, we allow our tendency to be associated with nonsense such as the BC Hydro bombing we will reduce this slim chance to nothing. Our ability to replace Marxism will depend on our ability to make anarchism attractive to the average individual, the individual that the would-be terrorists like to feel oh-so-superior-to.” This anarcho-politician, who values “solid organizations” above activity, who wants to secure the hegemony of his reified ideology over the equally reified concepts of Marxism, will never understand that radical ideas are the living thought of people in struggle, not commodities packaged and presented, squeaky-clean, to passive “average individuals” as their salvation.

One of the most intriguing things about Direct Action is that they don’t want to be professional revolutionaries. One of the anarchists quoted in the Toronto Globe and Mail article says that “Part of the strategy is that anybody can do this, that ‘we aren’t professionals.’ They’d say that anybody who wanted could sit down for a couple of weeks and learn about explosives.” Or, as the police are reported as viewing it, “Direct Action is not so much a political organization but a philosophy and tactic that anybody can be part of.” If this is true, then Direct Action can be set apart from almost every other contemporary group that has tried to act on similar terrain. Most of these groups have seen themselves, explicitly or implicitly, as a vanguard or strategic center of revolution, whence has derived their predictable authoritarianism.

There is, however, another side to Direct Action, possibly their dominant side. Too often, it sounds as if direct action does envision itself as some kind of vanguard. This is most apparent in their statement that militant action is the “springboard” to consciousness and organization, and in their assumption that the consciousness of the people must be transformed by the radical movement, that people must “wake up” to the reality of their imminent destruction. If Direct Action understands this “waking up” to be a dialectical process, if they understand it to mean that people will develop, in the course of their own struggles, an awareness of what forces they are opposing, of what must be done to overcome them, and what is a desirable vision of a new life, then I agree with them. If this is what Direct Action has in mind, then they will realize that any form of direct action must be an organic expression of a particular struggle—determined by the actual participants in relation to what they are trying to accomplish and with due consideration of the risks involved, the appropriateness of the means to the end, etc. It must not be a component of some overarching strategy, abstractly conceived, to create that struggle.

This distinction is crucial. This is not a moral argument against sabotage. I think of the wrecking of power lines in Minnesota, which was the culmination of a long struggle against the stringing of these lines across the lands of rural Minnesotans, and was undertaken by the participants (or so I assume). Direct Action’s bombings,

on the other hand, appear to the participants in the struggles to which they were connected to have come out of nowhere, to have been the project of mysterious “outsiders.”

This is what bothers me about Direct Action. They haven’t chosen their terrain of struggle, and the accompanying means, strictly in accordance with a self-determined goal. They also, and more importantly to them, want to “wake up” the people, to imbue them with revolutionary consciousness. This is the real meaning of their bombings, aside from any consideration of “slowing down the clock of death,” which strikes me as a rather unlikely eventuality, given the obvious weaknesses of the (barely) existing libertarian movement in the face of what must be done to overturn this society. The bombings are not only Direct Action’s way of striking back at the instruments of death; they are also their mass media (or their way of commanding the attention of the existing mass media), their means of conveying their revolutionary message. And like television, the mass medium par excellence, the form and intentionality of their activity not only presuppose, but likely reinforce passivity.

It seems to me that spectacular actions like Direct Action’s bombings, removed from a context of widespread activity, unclearly related to a specific goal, and not subject to debate and reflection by all the participants in the struggle, are easily codified by the media in accordance with the dominant capitalist ideology: bombings are the acts of “lunatics”; violence is employed exclusively by “terrorists.” To engage in “symbolic” actions in competition with the mass media is to play into the hands of an awesome force, to play a game that cannot be won. And worst of all, the “audience” is reinforced in the belief that “acts” are something created by others and broadcast to them via the airwaves or via the shockwaves of a bombing.

fifth Estate

Bob Brubaker
Direct Action Bombs Litton
1983

<https://www.fiftheestate.org/archive/311-winter-1983/direct-action-bombs-litton>
Fifth Estate #311, Winter, 1983

[fiftheestate.anarchistlibraries.net](https://www.fiftheestate.org)