

Anarchy in Toronto

The 1988 Gathering

Fifth Estate Collective

1988

Congas, bongos, tambourines, and quickly improvised percussion instruments—swirls of colorful clothing and hair, banners, trees, sky and flowers—animated discussions, joyous reunions and laughter, children splashing in the pool and riding “horseback” on an adult—people inside crowding literature tables and workshops. A gathering of the tribes!

The Anarchist Survival Gathering, Toronto, July 1 through 4, 1988 brought an estimated 800 to 1000 people, about 1/2 each from Canada and the U.S. as well as a few from Australia, France, New Zealand, The Netherlands, and England. People in their early 20s predominated but all ages were represented including veterans of the North American Italian Anarchist Movement and the Spanish Revolution as well as about 100 middle-aged. Participants were overwhelmingly white, with some Native Americans attending, and a handful of blacks. There were “punks” and “hippies,” men in dresses, and straight-looking folks—no yuppies in evidence.

The first day began as people straggled in for a General Meeting scheduled for 9 a.m. Discussion centered on requests referred to the meeting: a member of a Bolshevik Tendency (BLT) to set up a literature table and of a city TV news reporter to attend the General Meeting. Following several unfavorable comments the BLT’s request was rejected. The reporter stated he only had 10 minutes to spend so we discussed his request for 10 minutes until he left.

The Gathering organizers informed us of the media hysteria in Toronto that had preceded the Gathering. A *Toronto Star* headline shouted “Officials Fear Anarchists’ Idea of a Good Time.” These sentiments had been fueled by creative and exciting actions surround-



ing the economic summit two weeks before. Also a local garbage rag, *The Sun*, printed three articles featuring major disinformation and lies reporting an expected 15,000 anarchists including “white supremacists and neo-Nazis.” Ecomedia, Toronto’s anarchist biweekly, reported “it was mainly U.S. police intelligence (sic) sources who are spreading the lies...and want to create a situation which would pressure Canadian police not to be ‘outdone’ by the Yankees, into responding to this ‘threat’.”

We were surprised that very few of us had experienced any hassles at border crossings. Unfortunately, they began in Toronto the first day when several U.S. citizens were arrested and held for the weekend by immigration authorities for entering the country under false pretenses. We were alerted at the meeting to park cars with foreign plates away from the gathering and walk or take public transportation.

The Friday morning meeting was followed by workshops scheduled from noon to 5:30 and from 9:30 to 5 on Saturday. 63 were listed and categorized as presentation, discussion group, affinity group and skills with spaces available for spontaneous workshops. Following the weekend opinions on the workshops varied but most agreed it was difficult to choose between 9 workshops scheduled simultaneously, and that the hour and a half time slots were not long enough. Many workshops attracted 50 to 100 people making real exchange difficult.

There was much disagreement as to the value of each workshop based on different expectations, needs, and experiences of the participants. Adjectives and phrases expressed included inspiring, redundant, thought-provoking, lacking intellectual challenge, extremely valuable, learned a lot. Some folks felt a need for more formal and thorough presentations on specific topics such as the historical background of anarchism. Some said skills workshops offered valuable information while others wanted more direct experience.

For one young man the Youth Liberation workshop was the “best workshop of the day”. 100 to 200 mostly young people discussed “how we were raised, how we would end up raising children, what it means to be an anti-authoritarian parent, children are not our possessions, runaways and the need to set up an ‘underground railroad’ for them, the trend of parents to institutionalize children at the slightest provocation, ageism at the Saturday night bar benefits, high school activities, alienation from parents, society, and schools, and the need to be respected as equals in the movement.” The workshop continued long past its allotted time with folks exceedingly high on a feeling of solidarity with everyone there.

The Squatting workshop was really good. People told of their own experiences around the world and someone brought a slide show about a large squat that offered art, including performance art, and classes to the community. Most squats lasted about 2 months to a year but this one had lasted 4 years until it was torn down. People disagreed about the desirability of being isolated in a squat or doing community-oriented things. One participant would have liked to actually go to an abandoned building as part of the workshop and learn how to turn on utilities.

Two workshops were convened and presentations given by members of the *Fifth Estate* staff: “Empire and Ecological Destruction” given by George Bradford and “National Liberation Movements” by E.B. Maple. Following the session, Bradford expressed a feeling that what once was a tiny corner of anti-authoritarian theory—anti-industrialism, anti-technology, pro-primitivist—had emerged to a wider appreciation in recent years. Only a little was heard from those who fail to realize that technology is inherently a system of domination and continue to claim it is neutral, that spears and missiles are the same, and the like.

Maple's workshop, where he contended that national liberation movements have nothing in common with the concept of anarcho-communism, met with surprising resistance. His statements that each of the prominent "liberation" movements such as the Sandinistas, the ANC and the Salvadoran FMLN-FDR seek only to establish political states, their own cops and a capitalist economy was met with cries of "we have to support the people's struggles" as if it was a leftist convention and not an anarchist gathering.

Maple stated that there is a capitalist civil war raging in Central America to determine what sector of capital—left, right, or center—will develop market relations in the region. Quoting Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega's recent remarks that it was impossible to "abolish private property at this time" and that the country's economy was "free market" seemed to do nothing to convince those who would forget their anarchist principles and blindly support armed leftist politicians.

Maple said that the proper role of an anti-statist and anti-capitalist movement should not be as a rooting section for those who would set up the next tyranny but their critics. The interests of those people being directly oppressed by the U.S. would be best served here in the metropole by subverting the ability of the empire to wage war on small countries through the encouragement of mutinies in the armed forces and taking part on a critical basis in the anti-intervention movement.

Many of the pro-national liberation struggle comments in the workshop showed a basic lack of understanding of how capital moves across the planet. One militant from Minneapolis actually made the remark that "having a Nicaraguan boss was an improvement" and that if the percentage of exploitation was reduced, he supported it. If the anarchist movement has retreated to the point where one supports a leftist political movement because it wants to be the boss in a Coca-Cola factory, we are in serious trouble. In many ways, this shallow understanding of the world economy comes from the anarchist fixation on the state which often ignores how capital functions.

Still, the interchange was encouraging and while many continued an expression of the leftism they came in with, hopefully their ideas were challenged and they will also consider ours.

Three women who attended the women's health workshop all found it extremely valuable with a demonstration followed by a practical experience in vaginal self-examination, as well as information on birth control and self-insemination.

Several folks found the Subversive Art workshop uninspiring and left it early while others described it as the best workshop they had attended with lots of practical ideas for graffiti and vandalism. For one young woman it was her first encounter with exciting anarchist activism and not the "passive armchair" anarchists she was used to.

The Survival workshop was very diverse in terms of age and background of the participants and focused on personal survival outside the economic structure in anarchist communities. Topics included gardening, dumpster-diving and jobs that don't require college degrees.

A healthy spirit of taking art into the streets and making it part of our lives, tearing down barriers between actors and audience permeated the exciting Street Theater workshop.

Much debate occurred around what were seen by some as being exclusionary workshops i.e., one organized as a Wimmin's Only discussion and the spontaneous one for middle-aged anarchists. However, some issues were identified in those workshops that had not been addressed previously, issues that are not exclusive to the groups that identified them. Most of us are unaware or forget about issues not directly affecting us. For example we tend not to insure access for disabled anarchists at our meetings and events, or for anarchists below drinking age at musical events.

Issues identified at the middle-aged anarchist workshop included: 1.) How do we develop so that older anarchists value the excitement and fresh perspectives of younger anarchists, and younger anarchists value the history and experience of older anarchists? 2.) How do we maintain our enthusiasm and participation in the movement as family responsibilities take more time and energy and physical aches and pains develop? 3.) Entertainment planned for gatherings should be more varied than bands at the bar. 4.) How can our anarchist communities stop "warehousing" our grandparents, parents, and ourselves when we are older? (Notice the similarities to the Youth Liberation discussion.)

The Wimmin's Only workshop did not identify issues as clearly. Discussion centered on wimmin in the sex industry and prostitution in particular. Although no one voiced disagreement with the statement that prostitution, waitressing and typing are equally exploitative jobs, it occurred to me later that we would never have spent

1-1/2 hours discussing waitressing. Perhaps the discussion needs to come out of a much smaller affinity group—prostitutes and women in the sex industry. Their unique perspective may help to identify issues of sexuality, “morality”, and oppression that we need to address. Sexuality and/or sexism were recurring themes in many workshops.

During the Anarchism and Native People workshop an elder of the Oneidas recited the history of his tribe. Taking pride in their adherence to all treaties made with the Great White Fathers, the emphasis of this 20 minute narrative seemed to be the greatness of his tribe over all others. I was surprised that he seemed unaware of who he was speaking to, but even more amazed that the entire group of approximately 50 people listened respectfully.

I kept thinking about the discussion in the middle-aged workshop when someone had suggested looking to native american cultures as models for a community that values its elders. I was also remembering hearing about a presentation on the Spanish Revolution at the Chicago 1986 gathering given by a veteran of that war in which he was rudely interrupted several times until finally the discussion became centered instead on Nicaragua.

Was it the almost regal bearing and carefully phrased slow speech of the Oneida that held the respectful attention of anarchists who would have shouted down another with the same message? Was it a mystique of the native american elder?

There needs to be a middle ground, a way to respect and value the knowledge and experiences of the elders of our community, but at the same time to be able to voice disagreements and disapproval if their message is way off base.

In any event the rest of the workshop included valuable discussion precipitated by accounts given by several other native people about recent struggles and some successes. Comment was also made that while other political and ecology groups often tried to push their own agenda for the land, anarchists were the only ones to consistently support the tribes' decisions.

Saturday night 8 hard core bands at the Silver Dollar Bar attracting mostly the punk crowd featured MDC from San Francisco who because of immigration concerns had to appear as “My Dog Charlie”. Both with the high energy and the heat of the night, it rapidly became the “Sweat Lodge of Slam” in the words of one frenzied participant.

Several blocks away a slightly older but no less enthusiastic crowd pushed into the sweltering Siboney Bar to hear 3 other bands. Imagine, a two-tone reggae band from Toronto, was received so enthusiastically that the lead singer exclaimed “This is the best night of my life. It made every other awful bar gig worth it to be here.”

They played a driving brand of reggae with words about peace, equal rights, ecology and animal rights which had the crowd dancing in joyful abandon and ready for the Layabouts. The heat and camaraderie encouraged people of both sexes to discard their shirts as the Layabouts from Detroit brought the house down in what may have been their last appearance.

Sunday was labeled “Day of Networking” in the guide to the gathering and included discussions on Network organization and process, affinity group discussions, and evaluation of this year's gathering with suggestions for next year's. Spontaneous music and dancing were continuous until 4 p.m. when we were treated to a variety of performances, including poetry, improvisational jazz, acoustic and electric music, and theater.

Discussion of the Day of Action scheduled for the following day went on for hours. The news that the U.S. had shot down an Iranian Airliner with 290 people aboard changed the focus of the demonstrations, and after long debate it was decided to march to the U.S. Consulate at noon. Toronto's Alliance for Non-violent Action also announced a demonstration including civil disobedience to begin earlier in the day.

On Monday at 7:30 a.m. about 50 people, many dressed in black and carrying lilies, accompanied a black coffin to the U.S. Consulate which was barricaded so completely by Toronto police that the action had to take place in front of a private club next door. 8 people entered the crosswalk on one of Toronto's busiest streets and laid down blocking all traffic. Police were brutal in their arrest procedures, contrary to the gentle image many people from the U.S. had of Canadian police. As one woman continued crying out in pain she and the arresting officer were surrounded by mounted police to prevent supporters from obtaining his badge number.

Around noon people from the Gathering began marching to the U.S. consulate chanting “Who's the real terrorist? U.S.A.,” “We don't want your fucking war! We don't want your fucking state! This time we retaliate!” Folks were herded like cattle through chutes past the consulate. Exiting the chutes at the far end the crowd crossed the Avenue onto the median, some climbing a monument to Canadians killed in the Boer War where a Canadian and a U.S. flag were burned amid cheers, and an anarchist set the black flag on fire screaming “We don't need symbols!”

The crowd then ran through a construction site behind the city hall and onto a street crowded with shoppers, tourists, and employees on their lunch breaks shouting the same slogans, as well as “Eat the Rich; feed the poor!”, pounding on newsstands, ululating, and tearing down Canadian and U.S. flags on a cenotaph. Strangely, women who removed their shirts in protest of nudity laws were largely ignored by police, photographers, and bystanders although 2 were eventually arrested.

Neither demonstrators nor police were sure where the crowd was going. A sergeant is quoted in the Toronto Sun as saying “We can’t pen them in. This is like Europe. Usually they go limp, we pick them up and take them away. This is definitely new—running in the streets.”

A woman watching the activity was heard to say, “This is like the 60’s. Someone should tell them the revolution is over.” Mounted police and police on foot picked off individuals in various skirmishes along the way, beating them with clubs, tearing hair, twisting arms and trampling some with horses.

When police tried to haul protesters to the ground other protesters pounced on them and tried to “unarrest” them, and more police joined in the fray.

One protester reportedly bashed a cop with a flag pole and another cop was attacked with mustard. A roar went up from the crowd in front of Eaton Center as an officer’s hat went sailing through the air. Three cops were sent to the hospital—one’s ear was bitten, another was hit in the head with a stick and another chipped a tooth.

The crowd headed back to the park followed by police, reporters and photographers. Demonstrators skirmished with reporters and photographers as they tried to prevent them from recording a spontaneous meeting to determine what to do next. The crowd thinned as people became frustrated, tired and hungry.

Thirty-one people had been arrested. All were released the next day but 14 U.S. citizens and one West German were immediately arrested again and held another night in jail for violation of immigration laws.

They were then arraigned and released with the admonishment that they be out of the country, reporting at the place of exit, by midnight. They are supposed to return for a hearing in several weeks.

Following the demonstration Toronto Alderman Tony O’Donohue was quoted as saying, “I say we load the whole lot of them into a truck, take them to the border and kick their asses across.”

“Those bastards—this kind of stuff cannot be tolerated,” said Alderman Chris Korwin-Kuczynski, “We should have a heavy hand dealing with them and they should be taught a lesson. A big fine or 30 days in jail. Slapping them on the wrist and letting them go doesn’t do anything.”

Participants responded to the Day of Action with elation but also with fear, anger and disappointment. It was frightening to be herded like cattle past the Consulate and, later, to feel incapable of stopping attacks on other demonstrators. Most people, myself included, followed demonstrators ahead of them with no idea as to where they were headed or why.

The lack of organization, an agreed-upon route and definite targets after leaving the Consulate resulted in the anger and disappointment as well as the elation. It was exciting and to an extent empowering to know that police were not in control. But neither were we.

In the guide to the gathering organizers wrote, “Everything is possible! Diverse forms of actions are enthusiastically envisioned. Affinity groups help to make this happen.” Not many of us took this to heart.

We are still letting others make plans and decisions for us rather than taking on the responsibility ourselves. My affinity group never discussed the demo more than to suggest to each other that we try to stick together, and I’m sure other affinity groups had no more specific plans.

Granted, a public spot, such as the park, is not a good place for 800 people to discuss real actions that show our determination to oppose laws and institutions that repress and oppress us. But affinity groups had ample time and place to use the maps and other information provided in the guide to discuss what they would do.

In his article about the gathering in Anarchnotes 4, Mike Gunderloy says he left Toronto early Monday “so as not to have any chance of being caught up in the consequences of the planned action.”

Echoing the sentiments of others he writes, “After the events of the last three years, how can anyone still think that demonstrations in connection with the gathering are a good idea? Attacking armed cops in a strange city in the company of people you don’t know, after a planning session held in the presence of police and reporters, is not revolutionary. It’s just plain stupid. There are enough crazies hanging around these gatherings to make it completely impossible to hold a nonviolent action, so any action is going to turn into a violent confrontation,

getting people hurt and arrested, and draining the resources of our network. The militant ringleaders strike me as completely irresponsible, especially for suckering in relatively innocent people who weren't sure that things would turn ugly."

Reactions of people from the FE and others from Detroit were not as severe, perhaps because we suffered no casualties. We would like to hear from others on this subject.

Energizing, exciting, inspiring! Those are words many folks used to describe their overall reaction to the gathering. To those coming to a gathering for the first time, seeing and meeting so many people working for change and living "outside the system" was immensely encouraging. For everyone, coming together to share ideas and experiences that seem to set us apart from people we meet in our everyday lives was stimulating and intoxicating and finding so many and such a mixture of people in solidarity was empowering.

Hooray for us!!

Many folks who had attended the gathering last year were pleased that the majority of people in attendance this year seemed to have given very careful thought to the issues and topics discussed.

Thanks, ovations, drum rolls, howls, and ululations are due for the people in Toronto who worked hard to make this gathering. The space was great! Two buildings, 1-1/2 blocks apart with classrooms, auditoriums, snack bar, lots of toilets and that wonderful yard and fountain surrounded by a park! Providing inexpensive/free, good and healthy food allowed more time for playing, lazying, continuing discussions together and for more people on tight budgets to participate. Thanks for finding so much free housing and Alexandra Park for Sunday.

For other accounts see *Ecomedia Bulletin*, P.O. Box 915, Stn. F, Toronto, Ont., M4Y 2N9 and Anarchnotes 4 C/o Mike Gunderloy, 6 Arizona Ave., Rensselaer, NY 12144.

The next Gathering is scheduled for late July 1989 in San Francisco. There will be a planning meeting in mid-October of this year held in Philadelphia; more as we get the details.

Related

See Clarification in FE #330, Winter, 1988-89.

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