

A Debate on Tactics

Anarchy in Washington

Ana Coluthon

T.S.

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1988

FE Note: About 100 anarchists joined an Oct. 17th demonstration at the Pentagon to protest U.S. intervention in El Salvador which has resulted in 65,000 deaths to date. The action entitled “Blockade the Pentagon,” resulted in 200 protesters being arrested in civil disobedience actions and a raging controversy over the more militant activities of the anti-authoritarian contingent.

The official sponsors included the leftist Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES), whose politics more accurately are in solidarity with the armed politicians of the guerrilla groups, and the religious-based Pledge of Resistance, a national organizing campaign for civil disobedience against U.S. Central American policy.

The article below from T.S., who was a participant in the anarchist activity, answers charges published in a leftist weekly, *The Guardian*. The newspaper carried an initial report of the blockade and a letter the following week from Bob Witaneck and Karen Walden who charged that the anarchists were “difficult to distinguish (from) those saboteurs the left has always had to deal with.” Their major complaints are repeated as T.S. answers them.

A letter from Mike Gunderloy of *Fact Sheet Five* follows that account with comments on the Mayday Network, and that in turn, with a word from Ana Coluthon of the FE staff.

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One wonders if a *Guardian* writer actually attended the October 17 Pentagon Blockade (*Guardian*, Oct, 26). There was no mention of militant, mobile, effective, and very noticeable tactics of independent groups of radicals, as opposed to the “sit down and arrest me, please” official tactics.

The article did mention that the south Pentagon parking lot remained largely empty—but that was not entirely the doings of CISPES, etc., liberals, Leninists and pacifists. It was the direct action work of the Mayday Network of Anarchists, who, with no apologies, took very seriously that this was supposed to be a blockade.

We freed people from our group from the cops so we could keep the action going. We built barricades and fires to stop—blockade—traffic. We physically stopped vehicles and held the doors closed of a bus of Pentagon militarists. (There is a story making the rounds that we threw burning material under an inhabited car. None of us know of this incident—no one as far as we know has come forward to say they actually saw this.)

CISPES, etc. were well aware that the anarchists were coming” and told us there would be “plenty of room for creative activities.” We attended some of their NYC planning meetings.

In a November 9 letter, Bob Witaneck and Karen Walden blamed most of what the Mayday Network of Anarchists did on Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP) fronts. We take full credit for most of the militancy. There were very few RCP-oids—they’ve learned to stay clear of us, as we want no part of their totalitarian ideology. Many people at the demo (and in ongoing gossip) made/make the mistake of identifying the militants as RCP.

The Mayday Network of Anarchists—a federation of activists from the U.S. and Canada—produced a special newspaper *RAGE!* [See comment below] to identify ourselves at the Oct. 17 action. The night before the action, CISPES dumped the papers off a bus on a sidewalk in Washington and left them there instead of bringing them to the central organizing center for us to pick up. Luckily we did retrieve a few to hand out.

Our group was joined by Green and independent militants. There was another group also using militant tactics who, I believe, were with the Progressive Student Network. We heard talk of CISPES members who wanted to go beyond the moderate demo tactics. Afterwards we were congratulated by activists sick and tired of orchestrated spectacles and charades—“non-violent protests”—where everything is worked out pleasantly with the cops.

Social change takes place by force, not servility, and the Guardian knows it. Witaneck and Walden note that we (the anarchists) should “adopt a civilized mode of behavior toward the rest of the Left...” That is exactly our complaint against the left and pacifists.

The latter often have a policy of literally turning people in to the cops whose “behavior” the “peace marshalls” (peace pigs) don’t like. Who appointed them as self-righteous authorities—elitists who get to play a cop for a day? I personally grabbed a friend away from a cop who had been pointed out by a demonstration “leader” for arrest. Other such occurrences abounded.

Witaneck and Walden complain about how radicals “milled about in the street...causing confusion.” Hey, that was the point! Weren’t we there to disrupt Pentagon doings? In fact, it was the “organizers’ attempts to remove” us that caused the real confusion and chaos as we needed to regroup or else be isolated by the cops. These “peace marshalls” were quite sorrowful in their armbands, frantically yelling into walkie-talkies, and acting like silly school teachers attempting to control the rebellious.

As far as “poking” and “hitting” Pentagon militarists, very little of which actually occurred, again no apologies. Can that “violence” be compared with what is planned inside the Pentagon? It is the height of elitism and privilege to leave the dirty work and violence to those in the Third World while actions in the U.S. amount to no more than giddy folksinging picnics.

People bragged about how happy they were to get busted. They couldn’t wait. They told of how “nice” most cops were. Unnoted were how the anarchists were jumped and beaten by vengeful cops as they left the demonstration area.

Importantly, and totally unmentioned by the left and straight press, was another reason for the anarchist’ action; that we were against all imperialism, not only U.S. Imperialism. Our banner read “No to US/USSR Imperialism.”

We secured solidarity statements for the demo from dissident groups in Poland and Ukraine. These statements were carried in our *Rage* newspaper. We asked CISPES et al to carry the statements in their media packet but they didn’t. We were also not allowed to read the Eastern support statements from the rally platform. The pro-Sovietism of the left is a provocation that enables the state to paint all those opposed to U.S. policies as supporting Soviet-bloc repression and Imperialism.

Polish members of Freedom and Peace picketed the U.S. Embassy in Krakow, Poland October 17. Those statements also attacked Soviet imperialism, as they should, as that is what Poles and Ukrainians live under, not “U.S. Imperialism.”

And yes, many flags were proudly burned at the Pentagon by us “violent” ones—including a Soviet one, which was then, while on fire, thrust into my face by a “peace marshall.” I then (again with no apologies) threatened the “peace marshalls,” in no uncertain terms, that I would physically not tolerate any more of their real violence. We did not throw a burning flag at demonstrators, and did not as a group burn crosses erected by Christians. Our network had a firm position of not interfering in others’ doings or bringing heat by the cops on others.

One could go on. The point is there are plenty of us out here, not necessarily anarchists, who want to physically disrupt and overthrow U.S. capitalism, and are tired of only chauvinistically protesting the U.S. when so much oppression is also caused by the Soviet bloc. Most young and rank and file militants hate Soviet-type systems. We are actively building alliances with oppositions in the East.

There is nothing so undermining to the elites of East and West as combined East and West dissident movements. We have as little faith in the “left” as we do in the right. Electoral politics and legally controlled “demonstrations” show how much the “left” has been coopted by the system.

Radical anti-authoritarianism is the social life of many youth all over the industrialized world. What we have to say to the right is obvious. What we have to say to the left is, “we are growing, getting organized and are here to stay. Do not trifle with us.”

—T.S. from NYC

Is MAYDAY For Real?

by Mike Gunderloy

By now I presume most of you have seen *RAGE!*, which was issued for the Pentagon blockade through the co-operation of several anarchists and members of the Revolutionary Socialist League. For those of you who haven't, I'd like to quote one sentence from the very first page: “*RAGE* is a newspaper published by the MAYDAY Network of Anarchists, a loose association of anti-authoritarian groups and individuals from across North America.”

Whatever I may think of the political analyses within this broadsheet, I am absolutely appalled and infuriated by this statement. By publishing under these pretenses, a militant few are attempting to position themselves as spokespeople for the anarchist movement. This is both ludicrous and offensive to those of us who disagree with the statements in this publication, as it implies that we are somehow not really anarchists.

A proposal to place a formal organizational structure over the anarchist movement failed at the Atlanta organizing meeting. A proposal to establish a “North American Anarchist Network Temporary Charter” failed at the Toronto gathering. Now we see some of the same people apparently going ahead to establish an anarcho-bureaucracy, with themselves at the head, which the movement neither needs nor desires—as evidenced by our own consensus in previous gatherings.

For the record, there is no “MAYDAY Network of Anarchists.” There are anarchists who have held three successful gatherings, but we have not yet put into place any formal bureaucratic organization to continue these gatherings and other activities. No doubt this idea will not go away. But for the next time someone proposes a bureaucracy to hold meetings, control “membership,” issue publications, and undertake other activities, I have a counter-proposal: “As anarchists, we are sovereign individuals. Though we may, as a group, come to collective decisions via consensus, in the absence of such consensus no one of us speaks for any other. The network which facilitates the anarchist gatherings does not issue position papers, leaflets or other propaganda, and anyone claiming to speak for such a network is a fraud.”

Most of you know me. I've been involved in these gatherings since the very beginning. If the trend towards vanguardist bureaucracy continues, I won't be involved much longer.

Mike Gunderloy

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Ana Coluthon comments

I want to begin by congratulating the comrades who, through great effort, put together the anarchist contingent at the Oct. 17 Pentagon march and published the newspaper, *Rage*. It is actions such as those which allow us to identify ourselves beyond the statist, authoritarian politics which so often typify such liberal/leftist/religious events.

However, I, too, have some criticisms, ones meant in a comradely spirit towards those involved in the above activities. First, let me emphasize that “Fifth Estate,” as this paper is listed in *Rage* under the heading, “Directory of North American Anarchist Groups,” is a newspaper put out by friends, hence, not a “group,” in the common political sense. Also, we never expressly call ourselves “anarchist.” We believe in creating anarchy, but shy away from all isms given their propensity to become ossified ideologies.

I realize there is a current push towards creating a formal anarchist federation which seems to be coming from a fairly narrow sector of the North American anti-authoritarian movement centered mostly around the Minneapolis-based RABL group and the born-again “anarchists” of the Revolutionary Socialist League (RSL).

Having witnessed similar attempts in the past, those of us who work on the FE want nothing to do with such formations. All recent federative groupings have been disasters and there is nothing to suggest that the one currently being agitated for would be any different. If you have any doubt, take a look at the rules of federation proposed by RABL in the current MAYDAY, (Box 536, Decatur GA 30031). They seem fit for a leftist sect or a formal party, but not for those who desire a political life marked by freedom of action, independent of bureaucratic encumbrances.

Much of this comes from the tired hand of the RSL, proving once again that you can take the people out of the party, but you can't take the party out of the people. The RSL may have gingerly backed away from obeisance to the mass murderers and counter-revolutionaries, Lenin and Trotsky, whom they revered for so long, but their instrumental style of politics which all leftist parties employ, remains intact.

Gunderloy is correct about their intent. The RSL and their friends want to position themselves in the center of the anarchist movement by using the tactics of recruitment which failed them miserably for so many years in the leftist milieu. RABL, at least, seems to want this as a way of spurring on anarchist organizing, whereas the RSL sees the opportunity for new members.

To be honest, although much is said about anarchists and anti-authoritarianism, the tenor and politics of Rage often belies that perspective. Its ultra-militancy, its constant invocation of “struggles” (even ones which are clearly nationalistic, marxist-leninist or reformist), and its uncritical approach to “anti-imperialism” speaks more of a No Business As Usual approach than anarchist.

Leftist-type rhetoric about “breaking free from imperialist domination” fails to understand how capitalism extends itself through movements like the ANC, PLO, and the FMLN-FDR. The authentically heroic struggles of Third World people are seen by leftist politicians as the only manner in which they will attain the power of the state and relegate those who bled on the battlefield to wage work in the new “revolutionary” factories.

A final note on tactics: Give ‘em hell. Let demonstrations be as wild as its participants desire; do battle with the cops; break windows; stop those who plan mass murder for a living from getting to “work.” Still, let's not let the quantity of broken glass be the measure of our success.

We should be equally pleased by marches in which families, children and elders can take part without fear of confrontation with the police. For instance, the May 1988 demonstration against the Detroit trash incinerator was spirited and determined without being confrontational. I wouldn't contend that either action was less successful because it did not employ the tactics of the other.

fifth Estate

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