

# From L.A. with Love

## Active Transformation

2000

### Centerfold insert

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I recently traveled to Los Angeles for the North American Anarchist Conference (NAAC) and Democratic National Convention (DNC). The NAAC was held August 11<sup>th</sup> through the 13<sup>th</sup>, while the DNC was the 14<sup>th</sup> through the 17<sup>th</sup>. Both events had an extremely strong anarchist presence. In my eyes, the NAAC was a major success. I was one of the first people to arrive, and I was energized by the numbers of people constantly outside the front doors waiting to sign in. All in all, over 500 people attended, but they were not all there at once. Many people were only at the conference for a day or so, or spent a lot of time at the events at the Direct Action Network's convergence center, so it seemed like it was smaller because there were only 100 to 200 people at the conference at any given time.

The NAAC was held in a fairly large warehouse previously used for raves. There was a large room, small room, loft, and outside patio. This was where all the workshops were being held; also being the only places for people to sleep, eat, and converse. We were in a rough neighborhood, so people were encouraged to stay on the property. By being so close together, it brought us a close sense of camaraderie. I met and became friends quickly with people from all over the U.S., and there were even a few people there from different countries. Everybody being cramped into a poorly ventilated warehouse for days with scorching heat both inside and out eventually took its toll on people. By the third day, the conditions were pretty gruesome..

I woke up on Sunday to see a side alley reeking of vomit, and people running to the outside toilets (some of them not making it in time). It was like a bad after-school special. Apparently, the food from dinner the night before may have been contaminated, which made for an interesting situation. I was disappointed to see that many of the workshops scheduled were canceled, but made due with the ones that were still being offered. Workshops ranged from information about Columbia, the EZLN, Green Anarchy, security culture, black bloc, and copwatch. There was also a panel discussion and a vision discussion which generated many good ideas, but were hard to facilitate because so many people were participating and talking about totally different topics.

Two issues would not seem to die during discussions, which made debates tedious. There was a constant war between syndicalists and primitivists over strategies of the movement which stemmed from different viewpoints and theories about society. Most of these discussions were done in a somewhat productive manner, so it was more of a constructive debate.

The other issue, the topic of property destruction, never died. There were two meetings at the DAN convergence center focusing on this topic. At one meeting about property destruction, activists from DAN center insisted that the anarchists from NAAC were representatives of the black bloc (even though they were in plain clothes and clearly NOT representing the black bloc or any affiliation with the black bloc), then singled the anarchists out to ask them their feelings about property destruction, and black bloc tactics.

Throughout the entire week, DAN made it clear that they did not support property destruction in any way, and some members were persistent in saying that property destruction would not be welcomed at their permitted marches.

Many pacifists from the DAN center came to a “Pacifism as Pathology” workshop at the NAAC space. Here, once again, a workshop that was centered around a well-written essay about pacifism as a strategy and tactic got turned into a heated debate about property destruction. People who didn’t even read the essay rushed to put their two cents in about the never ending property destruction “discussion” (I phrased this way because the whole façade of it was that it was not a discussion at all, just arguments about whether or not property destruction is justified), and the workshop got completely turned around, and the entire focus was once again, geared away from revolutionary politics and turned into a finger pointing debate.

I unfortunately did not attend the rest of the workshops scheduled on the last day because I was so disappointed with how this workshop and other workshops had to end. I wanted to go the NAAC to learn things and meet new comrades, and by the last day, I felt like it just wasn’t going to happen inside the workshops. Conversations and debates turned from being constructive to arguments often not even directly involved with the topic. This does not mean that I lost all hope in the event, because I spent the rest of the last day of the conference hanging out and talking with members of The August Collective and other anarchists, and had a really good time and a refreshing break from all the arguing.

## **Monday at the DNC (A Moment of Freedom)**

The UWA march on Monday afternoon kicked off a week of resistance against the political system and state in general during the DNC protests in LA. The march began in Pershing Square, and ended in front of the Staples Center just in time for Rage Against the Machine to begin playing. The rally attracted well over 10,000 people, with a strong community presence at both the march, and during the Rage show.

Rage played a terrible set, not even talking to their crowd between songs. It was almost like they pacified the masses from direct action. As thousands of people turned to face the Staples Center to flip off the people inside chanting along with Rage, “Fuck you, I won’t do what you tell me,” the black bloc was putting words into action.

The Ruckus started with the black bloc throwing empty water bottles over an at least 15 foot fence hitting riot cops stationed in the street between the black bloc and the Staples Center. Police repeatedly fired pepper spray at the black bloc, which was not backing down. They then ripped out street signs, smashed them on the sidewalk, and hurled concrete chunks at police.

Police responded with a round of rubber bullets, and more pepper spray, but the black bloc was not intimidated. Two anarchists then climbed to the top of the riot fence and waved black flags. They too are pepper sprayed, but refuse to move. The masses of people were torn between seeing Rage Against the Machine, which was still on the main stage nearing the end of their five song set, and becoming part of the ruckus initiated by their comrades.

Ozomotley next took the stage and urged protesters to stop fighting with the cops, smoke herb, listen to their set, and forget about the war with police that was beginning to wage. This plea was not successful.

The Police Commissioner quickly cut the power to the main stage, and told everyone that they had 15 minutes to exit the area. Hysteria immediately hit the crowd, and people weren’t sure what to do. People feared leaving and being picked off by cops, or staying, and being beat up. The majority of people left in one extremely large mass to prevent arrests. Those who did not exit in time were cornered in the protest pit by riot cops on one side, and cops on horses on the other. They were shot with rubber bullets, and some were severely beaten. A total of ten arrests were made.

By nightfall, thousands of people made it out of the protest area safely and filled the streets of downtown Los Angeles which were reopened for traffic. There were little police and media present, which turned out to be beneficial for the mass. People were free of police constraints and didn’t have to worry about being videotaped for the whole world to see.

It was amazing, and inspirational, even though it only lasted for a few hours. People were kept together by a large drum circle which gave the night an atmosphere of a big street party. People of all kinds were in the streets

chanting, dancing, having fun, partying, and blocking traffic. Community members of all ages far outnumbered protesters. I could tell that the people of LA were into the idea of freedom in the streets. During the ruckus, street fires were set, and some vandals broke windows at the Bank of America. Overall, the people of LA made a clear statement to those in power that these streets were reclaimed as truly, the people's streets, only if it was for a short period of time, and even if their story wasn't blasted all over the national and even local media. This night was clearly a MAJOR SUCCESS! It energized people, and gave them a strong sense of togetherness with not only protesters, but also with the people in L.A. It fueled protesters and gave them the energy boost they needed for the rest of the week's resistance.

## **Tuesday-Thursday DNC Protests**

Police arrests plagued marches on Tuesday. 46 people were arrested and charged with conspiring to commit felonies for chanting and rattling doors outside two different fur stores. There were also 71 arrests at the permitted critical mass bike ride after police escorted the bicyclists the wrong way down a one-way street. Their bikes were immediately impounded, and the cyclists were jailed.

Downtown Los Angeles turned into a total and complete police state on Wednesday. Over 7,000 police lined the streets for the police brutality march (isn't that ironic). Most were in riot gear while others rode motorcycles, horses, and Smith and Wesson bicycles. There were also nine helicopters flying over the city during the protests, three of which were directly over the Staples Center filming protesters.

The police ended up blocking off all streets surrounding the Staples Center, and trapping thousands of activists in the protest pit for over 40 minutes. Here, they once again pepper sprayed crowds and shot rubber bullets at protesters two yards away. The cops eventually allowed the mass to disperse, and did not arrest anyone. The DAN convergence space was also raided on Wednesday. Police surrounded the building, and planted snipers on the roof. No arrests were made.

Thursday saw a rather large march in honor of all the people who have lost their lives crossing the U.S.- Mexico border. The march ended in the protest pit, where an organizer from the DAN convergence center announced to a crowd of over 5,000 people that they initiated a "community" meeting, (without consulting or inviting members of the black bloc) and the members of the "community" decided that anyone doing direct action would be ostracized from the "community" because property destruction would not be allowed.

Besides being counterrevolutionary, this announcement tore down the morale of the black bloc. They thought that protesters from the DAN center were on the same side that they were on, when in actuality, they weren't at all.

Later there was a candlelight vigil, and a permitted march to the jail where fellow comrades were being held. Outside the jail, police cornered thousands of protesters, and after negotiations, eventually let the crowd disperse.

## **Police Tactics**

Police tactics in L.A. and Philadelphia greatly differed.

Police never arrested a large mass of people in L.A. like they did in Philly. Arrests were made at relatively small marches that had little confrontations with police. Jail solidarity in L.A. worked as the protesters were released a week later with their charges dropped, which, unfortunately, was not the case in Philly.

It was obvious that the Los Angeles Police Department wanted to make their authority felt on the masses without really making mass arrests. They thought that intimidation would be a better tool for controlling protesters.

They really wanted to ensure a low-key atmosphere-even though the downtown was turned into a total police state because they feared that the entire area would burst in riots. There were several undercover officers in the crowds, especially on Monday night. They were fairly easy to point out because they had bullet proof vests on under their polo shirts.

All of the police in the city seemed to be stationed at the downtown during the protests. If people really wanted to be effective, they could have went to other parts of the city (Hollywood, Beverly Hills, etc.) to demonstrate instead of having every single march end up in the protest pit.

Police also revamped the downtown area. They had police working on the situation as early as 1998. They spent over 8 million dollars on paid overtime for the officers, and also spent money cutting down hundreds of trees in the downtown area, and replacing them with a large fenced in protest pit directly in front of the Staples Center.

## **Black Bloc Critique**

Even with a police presence as big as the force in Los Angeles, a black bloc can be successful. The black bloc on Monday night did an excellent job not only keeping the crowd together, but also keeping a focus on things as the ruckus was happening. Members of the black bloc coached community members about strategies like staying with the mass of people, and covering their faces in case of tear gas.

Unfortunately, Monday was the only day that the black bloc, or any of the massive marches was successful. For example, on Wednesday during the police brutality demo, the black bloc (which was not the same people from Monday night) rushed to lead the march into the protest pit. The police marched between the black bloc once they were in the protest pit, and not only held them in the pit, but also split the black bloc in two, so they really couldn't be effective.

Another example of poor black bloc planning was on Thursday evening during the march to the jail. The black bloc ran to the front of the mass of thousands of people. Here they were singled out by the police because they were right out in the open, with virtually no other protesters around them. Of course, no property destruction could ever take place, because the black bloc seemed to be more of a fashion show on these days. Instead of being in the middle of the march, the black bloc insisted in being at the forefront. It would not slow down for the rest of the marchers, and overall had poor strategies, especially with security.

It seems to me to have a successful black bloc, participants must communicate with other protesters and community members (a thing that only happened on Monday night). On Monday, the black bloc ignited the minds of everyone at the demo (many of which were people who solely came out to see Rage Against the Machine), and united them together with a common cause while on the other days, the black bloc was a major part of why people were being separated and bickering. In these cases the people were not successful, and the police had the upper hand of the situation in every aspect.

The black bloc let opportunities for uniting people slip through their fingers as they rushed to lead the marches, and as a result, the marches failed, and thousands of people were almost arrested in several instances. We must learn from both the victories and mistakes of not only the demos in LA but also the black bloc and its strategies in order to be successful in the future.

# fifth Estate

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